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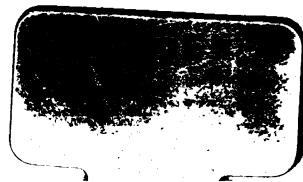
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POOR HUMANITY.

VOL. III.



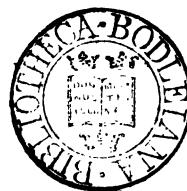
POOR HUMANITY.

BY THE AUTHOR OF
“NO CHURCH;” “CHRISTIE’S FAITH;”
“MATTIE, A STRAY,” ETC.

“Such is humanity.”—WALTER SAVAGE LANDOR.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.



LONDON :
CHAPMAN AND HALL, 193, PICCADILLY.

1868.

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250 . v. 173.

LONDON :
VIRTUE AND CO., PRINTERS,
CITY ROAD.

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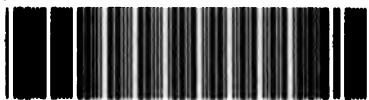
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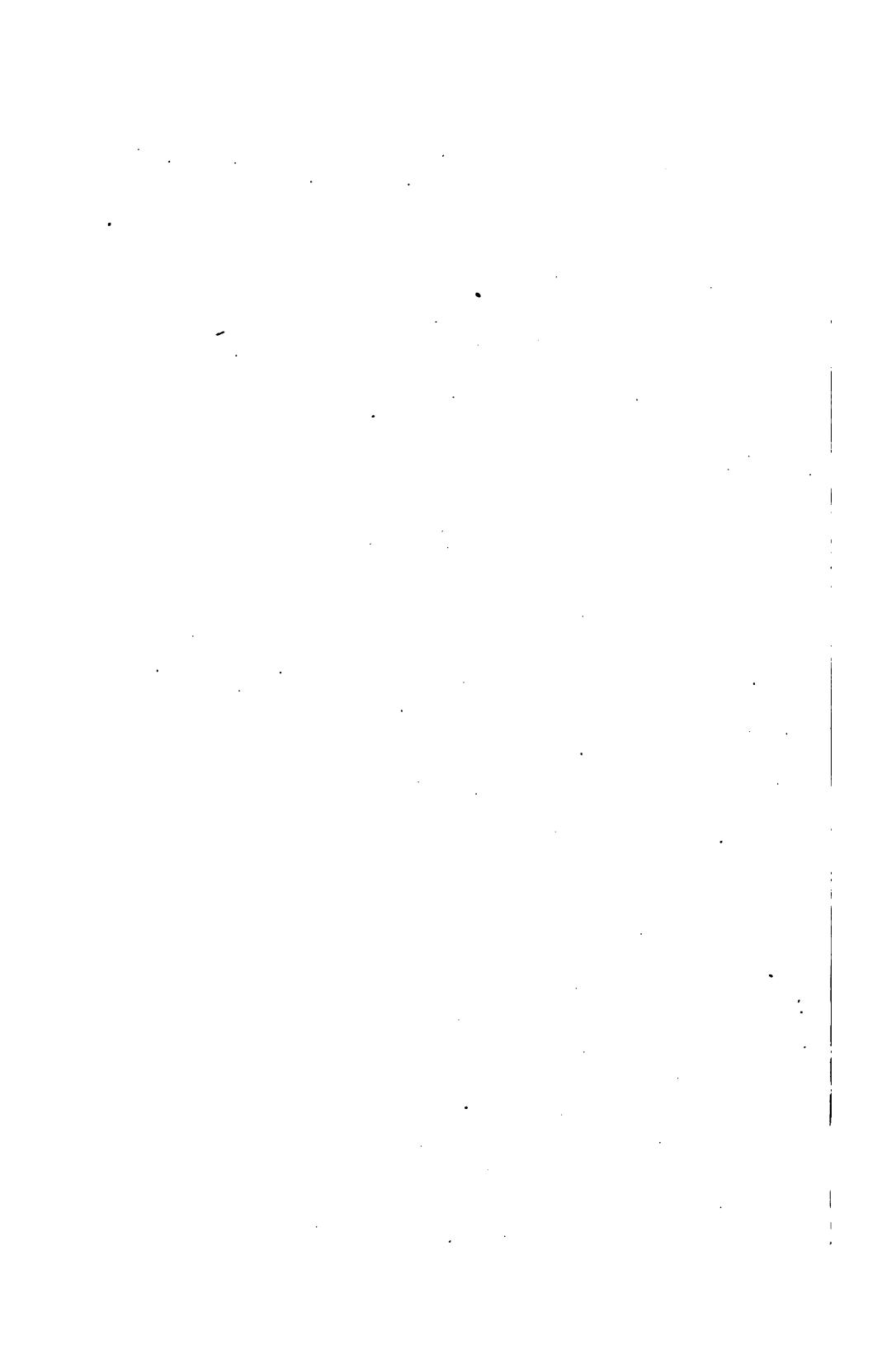
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POOR HUMANITY.

VOL. III.

patiently for Theo's return to throw a little light upon the mystery.

Mrs. Gifford might not feel justified in telling her everything without her husband's consent, and she would build no wild story from Horace's stagey ravings or Laura's stranger reticence. She and Laura had never been confidantes—had never, in fact, taken wholly to each other, and even she had not informed her sister-in-law of Horace's paltry confession that he had once loved a Miss Masdale, of Wilton. Once or twice lately she had wished that Laura had spoken of it; but pride had kept her silent when her sister-in-law had seemed to shrink from all allusion to her early days—indeed, to evade all mention of Horace Essenden's name.

Augusta had been perplexed by Horace's manner. He had been wild and excitable, and given out hints of a strange crisis at hand, but she would not believe in any "real wickedness" in his mind; she was sure that she had thought that down—had prayed it for ever away from her in those hasty moments when she had knelt at her bedside after he had left her.

These were her self-assurances, and as she went onwards she repeated them over to herself, a spell to keep down those other and darker thoughts in

which she would not believe, having still faith in the poet. Was it likely that she could have been deceived so long—she, who had prided herself on her knowledge of character and of the human heart, as to have loved a man who had never cared for her, but had always in his thoughts the woman whom he had first loved, and whom now he could never marry? Was it likely that he, with his fine idea of life's duties, his lofty conception of what was right and just, his poems full of idealism and purity, if weakness at times of sentiment, could be so arrant a hypocrite to the world, or so pitiable a coward to her?

No, no—a hundred times no. He would have never confessed his past love for Laura Masdale if he had had her in his thoughts; he would not have put her on guard and sought to raise her suspicions; he would not have owned that all was over with his past folly, and he required only her old faith in him, and her full forgiveness. Let her not brood on anything that was unfair to Horace, despite his terrible self-accusations, which were ringing in her ears still. If she could meet Laura presently, and Laura would frankly own that Horace had sought her out, and tell her all that he had said, how contented she would be; but if Laura were troubled greatly, and said nothing, what should she think of

her? Could she really consider that it was a matter that concerned Laura, her husband, and Horace, and did not in any way affect herself? Ah, let her hurry on and not brood too much upon the way, lest she should confound right with wrong inextricably, and do a great injustice in her thoughts to all she loved and to all who really loved her. A mystery of a day, to be followed by the sunshine of the morrow—nothing more than that!

She struck out of the high road across a small, triangular piece of common land, crossed a stile, and went along a footpath that skirted high hedge-rows, dipped suddenly into lower ground, and meandered on through a wilderness of trees. This was the cross path through the shrubbery to which Horace Essenden had alluded, and where the night seemed to have stolen before its time. Horace was right, she thought; Mrs. Gifford would prefer the longer route by the high road to the shadowy by-path at this season of the year. Mrs. Gifford was not strong-minded, and to a woman full of fancies the path was wild and suggestive. Augusta wished that she had taken the other road towards the curate's house, and whilst wishing it, she saw in the distance amongst the trees the figures of a man and a woman talking earnestly together.

A bend in the path had brought these figures into

view, and Augusta stopped, with her hand to her bosom as though a knife had smote her there. Was it possible? Could she believe it even yet, with such poor evidence before her? Were they Horace Essenden and Laura? And if they were, might he not have business of importance—a message from Theo to communicate? Surely—surely, poor humanity was not so base and worthless, and she so utterly mistaken in it as all this? She stood with her heart beating rapidly, battling with her suspicions, trying to believe in the vision that had already faded from her, and yet growing fiercer and more womanly, and slowly awakening to a consciousness of the dupe that she had been made.

"I will not watch them—I will go home," she wailed forth at last to herself. She retraced her steps for a few moments, and then wheeled round again and went onwards towards them, full of a new design that should unmask them or convince her of her folly.

"No, no—it cannot be Horace," she said in an excited whisper, for the man had taken the woman to his bosom and kissed her passionately, and the woman, with a half-stifled cry that reached Augusta's ears, had struggled away from him, and was now advancing swiftly towards the watcher. The man flung up his arms despairingly and dashed further

into the wood, and the bitter parting was over—between whom?

Heaven help her!—between Laura Gifford and Horace Essenden! For it was Laura who was close upon her, who would have passed her unrecognised, with head bent downwards and eyes full of blinding tears, had not Augusta caught her by the arm and stopped her with strange strength.

“Mrs. Gifford—one moment before you hurry away from him—one moment I must have!”

The young, fair woman shrieked faintly at the discovery, and looked with dismay at her who had confronted her. She was terribly agitated, and it was a face of agony turned towards Augusta's which would have asserted, under other circumstances, a claim to any gentle woman's pity. But she faced a woman balked of her lover—a good woman enough, but one who had suddenly become aware of the little love and respect that had ever been entertained for her, and who at first sight saw the truth in ugly and distorted guise, and in her woman's rage believed the very worst! Therefore a furious and merciless woman, as a good woman can be in her indignation at a wrong.

“Mrs. Gifford—my brother's wife—what does this mean?”

She did not release her hold of Laura's arm until

her sister-in-law winced with pain, when she flung her hand back from her, and stood there towering above her, with eyes blazing with jealous fury.

“I—I can’t speak now. I am choking, Augusta. Wait till we get home and I will tell you all. Oh, don’t stop me!”

“That man was Horace Essenden?”

“Yes,” she faltered forth.

“A man who professed a wish to marry me, and in whose wish I believed—a man who loves you still, comes here to tempt you from an honest home, and to whom you listen—Heaven help you, fool—to whom you listen!”

“Oh, you don’t know all—I cannot own all now!” she cried, wringing her hands. “I have been vain and foolish, but not wicked. I have struggled so hard and long—give me time to speak, and don’t look at me thus sternly. It is Theo’s face, and it judges me and has no mercy! I shall stand alone in the world with no one to pity me, and yet I have done my duty and acted always for the best.”

“He kissed you!” Augusta hissed forth. “By what right did he dare thus to insult my brother, and to degrade you in his eyes and yours? Is that part of the duty to your husband in which you take such pride?”

"Augusta, he was going away for ever—it was the last time he and I were ever likely to meet in this world. I was not prepared for him—he was miserable and heart-broken."

"Ask my brother to pity him, not me. He is a minister, and above us earthlings, perhaps. I loathe Horace Essenden and you for all the baseness in your hearts—for all your cruel treachery towards me!"

"Oh, if you would only listen patiently for awhile! You think the worst of me, as Theo does by this time."

"Theo knows all, then? All has been discovered: the duplicity of years, the hidden jest at that which should have been sacred in your eyes, and which you have been taught to scoff at, the simple earnestness and faith in you which Theo shared, and which you have thus wantonly abused, forgetting him and his child in the French romance which has its end this day."

"Yes, its end!" said Laura, catching eagerly at the last words; "the end of folly, not of wickedness, leaving before me the right path to pursue and grow strong upon, if—if you will not all turn away from me."

"The end of the romance, not of the results."

Laura wrung her hands wildly again. There was

an acute selfishness even in her grief, but she was unaware of it.

"Don't you think Theo will forgive me? Will he not listen patiently to my story—to that story which I have been so near telling him at times, and have been afraid to tell after looking into his grave, good face? I have not been so much to blame—I really have not, Augusta. Do not you think that after the first shock is over he will forgive me?"

"I do not think he will," was the cold answer. "A man does not readily excuse an offence against his pride, his confidence, his own honour, much less a man of Theo's temperament. I shall never forgive you, Laura Gifford, and yet I have been less wronged, and am, I think, more full of charity than he."

"But you—"

"Let me get away from you; I cannot listen to your reasoning. Go back to the home that has been outraged by your thoughts, and wait the coming of your husband—and your judge."

Augusta hurried away towards the wood, and Mrs. Gifford went homewards with faltering steps, terribly afraid of the future. Theo would be back to-morrow; by this time he knew all, she was assured, and he would return speedily, and heap upon her his reproaches, and then for ever afterwards the desolation that nothing could change, and she standing apart

from the world, a weak, helpless, unforgiven woman. The man whom she had met that day had spoken of the unforgiving nature of the husband, and tempted her to fly from it with him. He had drawn in his excitement the picture of her future with him and without him, and spoken of his love as only a poet could speak who had thrown away all self-restraint and principle, and saw but his future happiness in the guilt which never brings it. And she had left him terrified by his excitement and abandonment, and from the brink of the precipice was hastening, in preference, to the grim results of which her sister-in-law had spoken. Still, all this, in preference to life with the old lover; and so with leaden steps and leaden heart back to the home where a husband's smiles would never meet her more.

They would be all against her. Augusta had turned first—the very woman whose heart she had hoped to soften by a full avowal of her weakness—and with a protest against any sympathy with her, she had gone back into the wood, as though their paths diverged from that day. She looked once behind her, fancying that Augusta might have turned and followed her; but there was no longer signs of life upon the path which went on through the shadowy woodland.

Augusta had branched from the usual track, and

was pursuing her way through the thick grass and rank undergrowth, heedless of the late hour, and full of the one motive which now actuated her. Horace had turned away in this direction after parting with Mrs. Gifford, and it led on to the park land of Mrs. Martin, across which he might strike towards his aunt's house. If she could only find him, say a few words to him before he went away for good, speak a part of all that was in her heart, which would burst with wounded pride if she could not face him again, and shame him by her honest indignation ! To think that she should have loved a man so weak, and have so entirely mis-read his character ; that she and Theo should both have been despised by him, and have become his tools so completely ! Only to see him once more in life, to brand him as the coward and knave that he was ; to beat down the sophistry, the passion, and the false poetic element in which he was enwrapped, and wherein he thought himself a 'hero, and let him hear how she, speaking for the world, judged the devilish trick he would have played them all !

She thought that she might overtake him ; that she would find him presently face foremost on the grass, with his head buried in his arms, crying like the child that he was over the disappointment of his guilty hopes. He was prone to shed tears when

opposition rose in his path, and here would be a fine occasion for grief over the collapse of the last vision with which he had solaced himself, now that by some strange means the revelation of his infamy had amazed all who had ever trusted in him. But the shadows deepened still more as she wandered on, and the night of which Horace Essenden had spoken seemed to fall upon her, and to baffle the last wild wish she had had. Once she thought of retracing her steps, as she became conscious of the darkness and stillness around, and as her anger appeared to be subsiding with the fatigue which had come upon her ; and then a crackling of dry branches, as of a man forcing himself through a thicket in his eagerness to escape observation, suggested that he was aware of her approach at last.

“Stay, sir—one word,” she called forth ; but the branches cracked more fiercely beneath strong hands and impatient feet, and finally the sound grew less and less in the distance, as he whom she followed hastened with a greater speed away from her.

She stopped before a tangled mass of nut boughs, which were broken down in one place, and through which the fugitive had forced his way, and smiled bitterly at her own strange anxiety to overtake a lover whom she had lost.

“He would have only thought me a virago,” she

said ; " and after all there is a greater dignity in the eternal silence which must reign between us two from this day. Let him go."

She turned back, and then halted again, paralysed with astonishment at a something which she had passed in her eagerness—a something lying a little aside from the track she had pursued, and yet which her skirts must have brushed in passing.

Could it be the man of whom she had been in search ?—lying, as she had fancied she should find him, with his face buried in his arms, in that outburst of sorrow more worthy of a woman who suffered than of a man who had sought to betray ? Yes, it was he—it must be he !

She wished that she had not met him now. All her courage and resentment suddenly left her, and she remembered, first, how wild and strange he had been when they had faced each other that afternoon, and secondly, there stole to her the consciousness of how still a form it was lying in the long grass, and how only her own deep breathing was the one sound in that solitary spot.

" Horace," she said softly, and she thought the instant afterwards how strange it was that she should have called him by his Christian name, as though there was no longer any enmity between them, and all wrong was cancelled from the hour of that

meeting. She knew that he would not answer her—the coldness that stole over her assured her that he lay dead there at her feet, before her eyes, full of horror, had taken note of the dark pool beside him.

She could not scream—her voice seemed to have deserted her and left her dumb, and she sank down slowly, and tried with all her strength to raise his head, and to look into his face once more.

Yes, he was dead ; the wound across the forehead had been his death-blow. It was the man whom she had loved—the man who, suddenly cut down, she felt she loved again, and forgave, in her womanly inconsistency, all past trespasses against her.

“ Oh, to die like this—my poor, weak, erring Horace — to die without a word more to me ! Help—help ! there has been murder done ! ”

She had found her voice at last, and as she dragged herself away and went tottering along under the trees towards the path she had quitted, her clear, shrill voice rang out again with the wild cry of “ Murder ! ” and blanched the faces of all who heard it on that memorable day.

That memorable wintry afternoon in the cold November month, when the night falls early.

CHAPTER THE THIRD.

MR. GIFFORD SHOWS FIRMNESS.

THERE was excitement down in Deeneford. It was the first murder of which that quiet little village could boast, and the villagers turned out in a body to comment on the news, to wonder how it had all come about, and to make wild speculations as to whose hand had struck from life one whom everybody had liked. Truly this was a year of trouble for the great people who ruled in Deeneford. Those who had lived upon "the highest hills" had met the full force of the storm, and desolation was the consequence.

There was desolation in the house of Martin, whither the still figure was borne by those who had been first attracted by Augusta Gifford's cries for help. The blinds were drawn, and the shutters closed upon the daylight, and there awaited a grisly welcome to the old gentlewoman whose heart had found room for Horace when her own son had been taken from her. Now this second son lay dead in

the unlucky house, and seemed waiting there for justice on his murderer as well as for those who had loved him very much. The news was not confined to Deeneford, but spread from village to village, was taken into Kliston by mounted bearers of bad tidings, was telegraphed to those in London whom it concerned to know the truth, was spoken of in thousands of English homes next day. The police from Kliston were once more in Deeneford making manifold inquiries, holding long interviews with Miss Gifford, and sparing her not in her great tribulation ; visiting Mrs. Gifford—also a grief-stricken woman—at the rectory, and putting many questions to her which she could not answer, and many which she would not, eliciting only from her that she was the last who had seen Horace Essenden alive ; that she had bidden him good-bye for ever, as he had spoken of leaving England at once, and that her sister-in-law had gone in search of him afterwards, and found him murdered in the wood.

The police were baffled, but took many notes ; searched the wood carefully from end to end, and bided their time to piece the fragments into a whole, and drop down on some unlucky one. Everything was very suspicious, but there were facts wanted to make suspicions certainties. There was more to bewilder them than to lead up to the murderer at present.

Mrs. Gifford might have killed him had she been jealous of him, for instance, only she was a fragile-looking woman, and Mr. Essenden had fallen by a strong hand it was evident. Miss Gifford might have been jealous of him also, they thought, for he had been her lover; but although she looked stronger than the minister's "good lady," her story was too well made up for fiction, and her sorrow was too real. Still they had had their experience of much cunning, and were not quite satisfied. Years of tracking fugitives from justice had rendered them sceptical of much good in the world, and stranger things had happened in their time than fair women, and women of fair fame, standing up red-handed in the daylight. They wanted a motive for the crime, and they waited for it patiently, and loafed about the village and shrubbery, and spent their evenings at the public-house, treating everybody whom they met. Presently they might have a stronger clue to the mystery, these bloodhounds of the law considered, although they did not mind asserting that the whole job had been very neatly managed. It was the neatness of the entire affair which elicited their subdued admiration: these men were connoisseurs in crime, and knew a good article, a first-rate article, when it was set before them. This was undoubtedly a clever murder, and although they nodded their heads sig-

nificantly, and looked extremely knowing, they were not quite certain in their own hearts, after the first two days, whether they should be able to bring the case home to anybody in particular. This was a murder for revenge ; for no money was taken, and the gold watch of the victim was ticking cheerfully and safely in his waistcoat pocket when they took him up from the long grass where he had fallen. It was necessary, therefore, to learn the private life of Horace Essenden, to ferret out his little peculiarities, his favourite weaknesses, who liked him most, who hated him a little, and especially who had been heard to say that he hated Horace Essenden. It might be worth inquiry, also, to find out whether he had stood in any man's way to wealth, and whether his removal left the path clear for another ; and the name of one Paul Essenden was quietly added to the list after several pints of ale with the servants at the Hall, and in the face of the unanimous opinion as to the affection that had existed between the brothers.

Lastly, it was discovered that the horse which Horace had ridden into Deeneford had been found a few hours after the murder close to Kliston, covered with foam, and with marks of blows upon it, as though it had been ridden hard and treated badly ; but no one in the villages between Kliston and Deeneford had observed a horseman galloping furiously

along after dark, and it was possible that the horse had broken loose from the fence to which Horace Essenden had tied it, and scoured across country homewards.

There seemed more clues than one to follow before the inquest was held, and these helped to confuse the detectives and put them on false scents ; and there was a hasty summoning of one officer to London, as though a something there had started to the surface, and would at a fitting time bear testimony against the guilty one.

Meanwhile a man and woman had returned to Deeneford with grave faces. They had been summoned by the wires, and the day after the murder they came together in a post-chaise to the Hall, and the man, who looked very stern, assisted the woman, who seemed very feeble, into the house of mourning.

“ It would have been better, madam, to have remained with my sister, than to have come here,” said Mr. Gifford, who had been her escort from London to Deeneford. “ This is no fit place for you yet awhile.”

“ There is no place more fitting,” murmured Mrs. Martin. “ It is home—it was his home, and he lies there in his old room, my poor, poor Horace, who was the one comfort of my life ! ”

“ You must not despair of fresh comfort in good time.”

“ Ah, I will endeavour to listen to your counsel, to all your kind words, when I am stronger, Mr. Gifford—not now, when I can only think of all that I have lost.”

“ Yours is a great sorrow, to you a great loss even,” added Mr. Gifford gloomily; “ but there are those in the world who suffer more and bear their burdens well. Pray remember that, and do not consider that you are alone in your grief.”

“ What grief is greater than mine ? ” she said almost impatiently, as they passed into the house.

“ There are people who suffer all their lives, who find those dearest to them unfaithful and unloving. He at least loved you.”

“ Yes.”

“ He might have been spared, and you might have found in him a man who had deceived you, hidden away a secret from you, hated you, perhaps, and at all events had never loved you. There are people like that in the world—though you would scarcely credit it, Mrs. Martin—who give back no affection for affection, who cannot understand what mutual confidence and faith mean, and live a life within a life, where all is mystery, and you exist not.”

She did not understand him—she did not know that he was thinking of his wife, who had concealed a secret from him, and implying that he would rather have found her dead, as Mrs. Martin had found Horace, than have awakened to the truth which had for ever bowed him down. People full of their own griefs are not quick to read the trouble at the hearts of their neighbours, and the words of Theobald Gifford fell meaningless upon her ears. She took all that he had said for his method of consolation, of which she required none yet awhile, preferring the luxury of her own deep sorrow.

“ You are very kind to me,” she said, “ but I cannot take solace from your words.”

“ We will talk of solace presently. You will excuse my leaving you now, but I am anxious to reach home,” he said, “ to see Augusta and my—and Mrs. Gifford on important business. I will send Augusta to you in a little while, and till then let me recommend you not to distress yourself unnecessarily.”

“ When there are duties to fulfil, it is not fair to take into reflection one’s own powers of endurance.”

“ It is natural and right, I think.”

He went away after this last assertion, and Mrs. Martin, though she had thanked him, in departing,

for all his kindness and attention, was scarcely aware that he was gone, but sat looking dreamily before her in the dim light which found its way into the room through the closely-drawn blinds before the glass. Mr. Gifford went out of the house, stepped into his post-chaise, gave directions to be driven to his sister's villa, and once more passed his own home without a glance towards it. Those whom he met upon the high road touched their hats to him, and were astonished at meeting with no recognition in return, for he had been always courteous, if a trifle patronising, in his salutations, and, for all his pride and self-importance, had never worn that stony, impenetrable visage.

At the villa he was met with the intelligence that Miss Gifford was at his house, and that his wife had sent for her last night; and at last he was entering his own hall and hanging up his hat there.

“The post-chaise is to remain,” he said to the servant, and then he walked with a stately step into the drawing-room and glanced round him. He was relieved—intensely relieved—to find only Augusta in the room, though he did not show his satisfaction by any change of the face into which his sister looked earnestly and sadly before falling on his shoulder and weeping for awhile.

“Courage, Augusta,” he said in a cold tone of

voice. "I do not see anything to cry about at present. What was that man to us?"

"That man!" she repeated, as she looked at him again. "Are you speaking of Horace?"

"Yes. One whose whole life was a studied deception of you and me—who offered you his hand that he might be nearer to my wife, and so have greater opportunities of poisoning her mind against us, of tempting her from all that she had sworn to in God's house. We may pity presently the sad end of such a man, but we cannot regret in our hearts that he is for ever beyond the power of working evil. He has left to me a legacy of life-long misery."

"Death should cancel all ill-feelings, Theo."

"Perhaps so."

"I thought that I could never forgive him, till I looked into his poor dead face, and then I only knew him for the man I loved."

"You are a woman," was the moody answer, after a moment's silence, "and the evil he has done to you ends with his helplessness—it begins with me."

"I hope that you have not come to add to our trouble—that you, a man preaching mercy and forgiveness to sinners, are not here to act an unmerciful part."

"Have you forgiven her too?"

"Yes, I think I have. She is a child, and I

cannot wage eternal war against the weak. Presently I hope we shall understand each other better."

"You cannot understand human nature in any fashion, Augusta," he said, "to think it is possible for me to sit down in this home with a woman who has systematically closed her heart against me, and loved passionately that man. She or I leave this house, of course, for it would drive me mad to see her day after day, and remember how I had loved her."

"Your pride has been cruelly wounded, I own that, Theo, but she is a weak woman; more than that, I believe that she is a penitent woman."

"She never loved me," he replied.

Augusta saw then, though he did not, that that was the one secret of his unforgetfulness—the one fact which no future penitence of the sinner could extenuate. He had been proud of his wife's affection, and sure that he deserved it, and all the while her heart had been full of thoughts of another man. She had taken him for a husband with a lie on her lips, sold her beauty for his position and wealth, and never, never, in all their married life, and despite all her protestations, had she had one generous thought towards him—one simple idea even of her duty. Looking back at all her past professions of attachment, he was amazed and horrified by her

duplicity ; he could not reconcile the past with the actions of a virtuous woman, and he shrank away from her as from one who had cruelly abused his faith.

“ You are acting hastily and in passion, Theo,” said Augusta, “ and will be sorry hereafter for any rash resolution you have formed.”

“ My passion has burned itself out, Augusta,” he replied, “ and I am reasonable and just only. I do not look forward to any happiness in my future life, but I must have peace, or die.”

“ Is this the beginning of peace, then ? ”

“ Yes, without her. I have done with her,” he said.

His voice did not falter at the thought of this separation ; it was as cold, hard, and unsympathetic as it had always been when discoursing of ordinary affairs of life with people whom he did not care for a great deal—as it had always been when his mind was made up, and nothing short of a decree from heaven seemed likely to shake it. His was a nature retentive of an injury, even of a fancied injury ; but she could scarcely believe that he would be wholly unforgiving when he had heard all the truth, as she had heard all last night, from the woman stricken with remorse.

“ Theo,” she urged, “ pray assert nothing in this

rash manner ; reserve your judgment until you have seen Laura."

"I am not speaking rashly," he said, "and I wish you to see her."

"I ?"

"I would spare myself and her a scene," he said coldly. "No good can ensue from my meeting with her. I have no reproaches to offer, but pray let her understand that I have no excuses to listen to. It will be better—it will be much better for her to go back at once in the post-chaise to her mother's at Wilton—and she will hear from my solicitors concerning settlements in the course of a few days."

"And—the child ?" asked Augusta breathlessly.

"Will remain here, with you for its guide and counsellor, if you are not already tired of me with the rest," he added bitterly.

It was the first deviation from his iron method, the first sign that he felt and suffered acutely, beneath his studied imperturbability ; and Augusta was not sorry to find him more manlike, even though his words implied, for the first time in his life, even a doubt of her.

"Theo, you are speaking and acting rashly, for all this coolness — you are not yourself, dear. Wait with me till the morrow, sleep off the fatigue

of this travelling, and come with a calm heart and an untroubled mind to that decision which you think is best. But do not—oh, do not wring our hearts with fresh anxiety to-day ! ”

“ The post-chaise waits for Mrs. Gifford or me. If she would prefer it, I will go away myself,” he said calmly, “ but it will be extremely inconvenient whilst I remain rector of this place.”

Augusta turned away. She had seldom moved him from an idea ; in matters of small moment he had clung tenaciously to his opinion. How could she expect, in this great, grave question, to influence a mind so stubborn as his was ?

“ I cannot take that message to your wife, then,” said Augusta, covering her face with her hands. “ I am not strong enough for such a task, and she is in great trouble.”

“ Yes, her best friend is dead,” said Gifford quietly, “ and she loved him very much, long before she knew me. But I cannot allow that grief to stand between me and my resolutions; it simply strengthens them, and assures me what is best for both of us. I am doing nothing in malice, although you speak as if I were.”

“ Go and hear her story, then.”

“ No, I shall not do that—I have already said so,” he answered, “ and I hope a few words will

suffice for explanation. I know all—I heard all from Nella Carr's father."

"From—from whom?" asked Augusta.

"From the man who held the Upland Farm here. Nella knew the secret of Mrs. Gifford's love for Horace Essenden, and discovered that they met in the gardens of my house when you and I were engaged elsewhere. She was a wild, foolish girl, with no knowledge of life, and she exacted from them a silly promise not to meet again if she made no use of the discovery. In time Horace Essenden found out the secret of Miss Carr's early life, and being a thorough villain—"

"No, no; he was not wholly bad. Spare me, who loved him—spare him lying in his aunt's house beyond all man's poor judgment now!"

But he did not. He was strangely pertinacious, and for the dead he had no more mercy than for the living. He frowned at the interruption, but continued—

"And being a thorough villain, and finding that child in his way—a watcher of him, a dangerous girl, who might at any moment strip him of his mask—he betrayed her to the law."

"Oh, I can't believe it!" exclaimed Augusta, rocking herself slowly to and fro. "Do not say any more against him. You never knew how much I

loved that man, or how he may have struggled to keep strong. I will not hear any more!" she cried passionately.

"You force this from me. I do not wish to speak of him, or ever in this house again, after she has gone, to hear his name. You are excited and unlike yourself, Augusta," he said gravely; "you think too seriously of this."

"Too seriously!" she groaned forth as he went out of the room and closed the door behind him.

In the broad hall he faced the maid-servant who had admitted him.

"Where is your mistress?" he asked.

"In the nursery, sir, with the baby. Shall I tell her that you——"

"No, thank you; I will go myself."

He went up the stairs with a slow and measured tread, not hesitating by the way as he lessened with each step the distance between him and his wife. On the contrary, his face shadowed more and more—became, as it were, more angular and steely—and he seemed at his firmest and hardest when his hand rapped slightly on the panels of the nursery door.

"Come in," said a faint voice from the room, and for an instant it seemed to thrill him, and lead him to draw one long deep breath before he turned the handle of the door.

CHAPTER THE FOURTH.

MR. GIFFORD KEEPS FIRM.

THE Reverend Theobald Gifford had gone steadily on his mission, like a man whose mind was made up for the worst. He was sure that the worst had come, that there was nothing in the world could change him, and therefore there was no need for halting by the way to consider his next step. The sooner that all was over between him and his wife the better. Why should he linger, as though one tender recollection hung by his heart-strings yet, to prove in the last moment that he was no stronger than the rest of men?

He was stronger, he was certain. He knew that on great occasions he had shown a will of iron that no persuasions or arguments could break, and this was an occasion on which his heart might give way rather than his will. This was the great occasion—the awful climax—of his life. Let him meet it, however lasting might be his misery hereafter, with that unwavering persistency for which his friends

had always admired him. He had no one to study save himself; for there was only one in the world who cared for him a little, and she was his sister down-stairs, not the false woman whom he was going to see. Heaven help him, *she* had never cared for him at all!

As the door opened, the face of the nurse met his.

"Oh, it is master," was the exclamation, as though for the information of the person within the room, and then his wife's voice answered feebly, "He must come in, of course."

The Reverend Theobald Gifford was of this opinion also, and as the nursemaid backed away from the door he went very steadily and methodically across the room.

Mrs. Gifford was seated by the nursery fire, with her baby in her arms. Her little boy had been crying, and she had been rocking him to and fro, with her great brown eyes fixed upon the flickering flame before her, until the summons of her husband had seemed to fall upon her heart. She looked wistfully towards him as he entered, and the half-frightened, half-beseeching glance might have had its effect on one less steeped in his own wrongs, and less impervious to his fellow-creatures' troubles.

But this was a man with his mind made up, we have said, and Laura Gifford had seen that expres-

sion before, if less developed than on that day, and knew that no strength of hers could alter it. She had been looking forward nervously to this meeting. She had dreamed of it, and in her dreams had seen the same result; and she felt that there were no excuses worth offering to him, or to which he would care to listen. He had prejudged her. There was her sentence on his face already, and it was hopeless striving against that which her own weakness had brought upon herself. Horace Essenden's death was no reason that mercy should be extended to her in the opinion of one who had been ever more prone to speak of justice than mercy. She looked away, and trembled very much, clasping her baby tighter in her arms, to hide her trembling from her judge.

Yes, her judge; not her accuser. Augusta Gifford had said that she must wait for the judge on that awful day when they had met each other in the wood—when Augusta Gifford was wild and strange with the new jealousy which had flamed up at the sight of her—and it was the face of the judge she could not bear to gaze at.

Theobald Gifford stood by the fireside near her, one hand, rigid and cold, upon the mantelpiece, and the other opening and shutting behind him, with a strange regularity that looked like method, but

might be a sign of that nervousness which he would hide from her.

"You will oblige me, Mrs. Gifford," he said at last, "by giving the baby to the nurse, and asking her to withdraw for the present."

They were the dry, hard tones that were most natural to him—firm, precise, and clear, that he had used to all the world except herself, and that had kept his friends for ever at a respectful distance from him; it was his pulpit voice, when he was not excited by his theme, and was explaining a difficult passage in his Bible—not his home-voice, which had always been a gentle one, and which in all her life she felt that she should never hear again. From the high pedestal on which his love and confidence had reared her she had dropped heavily, and every hope was crushed beneath her in her fall.

She held the baby towards the maid almost mechanically; but when the girl was moving to the door with her charge, she said very suddenly—

"Don't take him too far from me, nurse—the next room will do; he will cry again, perhaps."

He had begun to miss the warm pressure of his mother's arms, and was already whimpering and protesting, and Laura looked towards the child and hesitated. If he would only cry it would be an

excuse to fold him to her breast again, and she felt strangely defenceless now that he was taken from her.

"Give him to Miss Gifford if he cries," said the clergyman, "and do not come here again unless you are sent for."

"Very well, sir."

The baby was borne off, and then the door closed upon husband and wife, who were at last alone together.

There was a painful silence for a few moments, and a little timepiece on the mantelshelf ticked with a distinctness that was startling. Mr. Gifford looked before him, not at his wife, and the hand behind his back kept time to the ticking of the clock, and opened and shut with every half second. He was marshalling his ideas once more ; they had fallen into disorder, for all the control over them that he believed he exercised, and he did not see exactly how to commence in that cool and dignified manner which should reflect credit upon himself, and show at least it was not malice that influenced his reasoning. But the wife, nervous and impulsive, was not strong enough to bear the silence, and looking up at him with clasped hands, began—

"Theo, I——"

Mr. Gifford found his voice immediately that his

wife's first words rang in his ears. He turned upon her fiercely, and checked her further utterance.

"Silence, please," he cried. "I am going to speak at once. Don't interrupt me—hear me out, and then answer if you like."

She shrank back into herself, and he commenced in earnest, addressing the opposite wall with great intentness, and not once in all his long speech—his last sermon—looking down at her, the text on which he based his argument.

"I have no wish to wound your feelings, Mrs. Gifford, by any of those accusations which men of less control might think it their place to give way to under similar circumstances. It would be beneath me to reproach you, and it would be only increasing the misery which you have so effectually brought upon us both. I will say nothing, and in return let me be spared the anguish of listening to any explanations, any expressions of contrition—any foolish promises for that future which stretches out dark and impenetrable beyond this day. I give you credit for being sorry for results, for not seeing to the bitter end, for meaning, in a certain way, to do your duty, and in a certain way to keep further from that temptation which beset you, and against which you had not the moral strength to strive. I will believe everything that I can in your favour

without a word being urged in your defence, and therefore you will spare yourself and me by simply listening to my wishes."

"But you do not know——"

He would not hear her yet ; he held up his hand, and checked her once more in her outburst of explanation. It was his turn for awhile to speak of all that had divided them, and he could not brook an interruption.

"Let me finish, please," he said coldly, and only the hand behind him gave any sign of restlessness. "It will make this interview briefer, and you will be as grateful for it as myself. I know everything. I am aware of your frequent meetings with Horace Essenden, and of your love for him ; and as your passion cannot be excused in any way, or in any light show you to advantage, pray insult me not by an allusion to it. I have said that you are doubtless very sorry now ; what more can I add, save that I am sorry too ? Surely I am just enough."

He could have said that he forgave her all past trespasses against him, and would begin life anew with her, she thought ; but she had not the courage to solicit his forgiveness, knowing by his manner with what scorn it would be refused her. She had some knowledge of the human heart after all—for no woman, however shallow, is without it—and she

guessed by instinct the bitterness of feeling, the suppressed indignation which his words disguised, and which might overwhelm her with his curses and reproaches if she beat down that icy wall between them. There was no mercy for her in his looks, and what right had she to expect it? If she had struggled to keep strong, had had him always in her thoughts, and had even grown stronger thinking of him, still she had never loved him or placed confidence in him, and he knew all the truth, and suffered from it. Long ago he had said that he could forgive everything but the treachery of an unwarrantable silence, and she had seen this result ahead of her, if he ever woke to the knowledge of the secret which she had concealed from him.

"I wish, Mrs. Gifford," he continued, "to be spared a scene. I have been tried very much lately, and would escape it, if I can, and you will allow me. There is no occasion for excitement, for you are doubtless prepared for all that I have to say—all that I wish should be done to promote our future peace."

She looked up quickly at these last words, and he hastened on before another interruption put him out again.

"There can be only peace of mind with you and me apart from each other—that, of course, is understood. We can, I hope, without disturbing the

world of scandal much, go our separate ways. There is nothing in this house for you to stay for, and you will be happier with your mother than with me. It would be impossible that you could find happiness here under any circumstances, and your presence would but add immensely to my trouble. Knowing that, I ask you, even as a favour, to go away quietly and uncomplainingly, and leave me to myself."

She thought that she was prepared for this, but she was not quite prepared, and when he had concluded, she said—

"But is there nothing that can be done? Oh, if you would listen patiently to my story, believing every word of it to be true! If you would only trust in me for the future, and learn to forgive, in time, the cruel past!"

"If I were as weak as yourself, you mean, and as easily swayed by the emotions of the moment," he answered. "Pray do not begin to reason with me, or to think for an instant that I can overlook your fault. I could not listen patiently to a single word of that story wherein a liar was the hero, and I the dupe of him; I could not believe it, knowing that you have never been true to your word or me, and I could trust in the first woman whom I encountered in the streets. I am too suspicious a man at the best, and

now, at the worst, you would ask for confidence, not seeing that you ask for further misery, more complication, a spy upon your actions, a gaoler who would torment yourself and him, and whose past love could no more be brought back than you could bring back to life that poor coward who blasted your happiness and mine. There, see how you excite me, and I would spare you every reproach if you would only go away at once without a word."

"At once?" repeated Laura, in a low tone.

"If it would not trouble you too much," he added, with a strange entreaty, almost politeness in his reply, "leaving Augusta to send your boxes afterwards. Or, if you would prefer to remain for good, I have no objection to withdraw, for I shall not like the place again, and my curate can act for me till I dispose of the living. Let me understand, madam, that you prefer not to be disturbed, and I will leave you to yourself."

"I—I will go, sir," said Laura faintly; "it is fit that I should go, not you, of course."

"Thank you. There is a post-chaise at the door, which will take you to Kliston, and thence you can reach Wilton by easy stages. Next week my solicitors will receive instructions to draw up a deed of separation, in which you will find that I have not acted illiberally towards you. They will consider

that your address is at Wilton, with your mother, unless they hear to the contrary from you."

She bowed her head in assent. She had not the heart to speak now that he had become so cool and business-like, and given such convincing proofs that his mind was fully made up to part with her. He was right, it was no use making a scene. It was simply adding to her own distress, and not softening the hardness of his heart. She had loved another man, and married this one ; she had met that other man since her marriage, and let him speak of love again : there was no forgiveness for that in the estimation of Theobald Gifford, of Deeneford.

"I do not think that I need take up your time any longer—everything is explained, I hope."

"I—I have explained nothing," she murmured.

"Augusta will relate to me the details of your story when I ask for them ; she will tell me all that you have said to her," he answered.

He never intended to ask Augusta, but Laura was not aware of it. He was content with what he had heard from George Carr, and she had nothing to urge in denial ; he was sure that there was not, from beginning to end of the accursed story, one extenuating circumstance. Hence, completely betrayed by her whom he had loved, he had completely shut his heart from her.

Still, she did not rise to make preparations for her departure, and he thought that it would be wiser to withdraw and leave her to herself.

"The man had better be informed that you will be ready in half an hour, I think," he said, looking at his watch; "that will enable you to catch the last train from Kliston to Eldonborough Junction."

"I shall see you again, I hope, before I go?"

"If you wish it, certainly. I shall be in the drawing-room."

"And the——"

And then she paused and looked hard at him for the first time, waiting for him to speak; but he did not appear to heed her new manner, and she rose with faltering steps to cross the room. He opened the door for her instinctively, and she went swiftly out of the nursery, and along the landing to her own chamber, whilst he, with slow, measured steps, went down-stairs to wait for her.

CHAPTER THE FIFTH.

MRS. GIFFORD GOES AWAY.

In the drawing-room Augusta Gifford awaited her brother. She looked up anxiously as he entered, and read upon his face no signs of a better understanding between his wife and him. He had returned with the same inflexible face to the room he had quitted, and she knew too well all that it portended. In matters of small moment, when it would have been perhaps common courtesy to have given way, she had seen his stubbornness silently assert itself like that, or a something like that, but less impenetrable ; and in this great event, affecting all his after life, it was the same dogged resistance to that which might be better for himself. He came back steeped in the shadows which he had taken away with him.

He had been always vain of his self-command, and even in that hour he seemed to be asserting his natural coolness, his natural strength, to surmount

those obstacles which would have dismayed weaker men.

"I have seen Mrs. Gifford," he said, "and she agrees with me that it is better to go away at once."

"You have not heard all her story?"

"I know most of it; the rest I can guess easily."

"Yes," said Augusta irresolutely, "but if she had told it you herself?"

"It would not have spared me in any way."

"But it might have aroused your pity for her—your sympathy."

"My pity," he answered coldly, "she can have at a distance; my sympathy for her and her temptations, never."

"Well, well, I cannot alter you, I know."

He was less himself with his sister than he had been with his wife. Here there was nothing to keep back, and for an instant he startled her by the anger of his reply, and proved that there was a fierce fire burning at his heart, for all the equanimity which he had evinced.

"You are like all women, Augusta," he said angrily; "your pity and sympathy are for those who make the greatest noise over their troubles, even if their own acts have brought them on themselves. Where is your sympathy for me and my

affliction? Great heaven! cannot you see that I need more pity than she does, and yet you plead for her who has bowed me down so low?"

"My poor Theo!" she said, bending over him as he dropped on the couch and rested his two hands on his knees, "you have my sympathy with your great trial—my pity, if you think it necessary. It is for your sake that I am pleading for her. You loved her very much before you went away from here, and if you were to forgive her all the past it would be better for your future, I am assured."

"I will never forgive her," he replied still more passionately, as though, having lost a portion of his self-control, the effort to retain the rest became more difficult; "I would rather die than forgive one who has marred my whole life, and rendered me a mockery to the world. I am the minister, the preacher, the adviser of my people, and I have proved myself the weakest dotard and the blindest fool amongst them. The world looks to me for an example, and I set it to the world. She has proved false, and had she been fifty times dearer to me, I should have bade her leave the home she has disgraced."

"Not disgraced."

"Disgraced in thought," he continued, becoming less like brother Theo than Augusta had ever seen

him : " wanting the courage to be wholly bad, to lose her name and fame for love, as wantons have done before her, but in her heart as black as all the rest of them."

" No, you judge too harshly, Theo. I thought for awhile as uncharitably of her, but her great suffering, her deep remorse, has weaned that awful thought away."

" It is the penalty of her folly to suffer and repent. Great heaven ! would you have her glad that I am left desolate ? Would you——"

He stopped abruptly, and looked towards the door, which was opening slowly and admitting his wife, prepared now to take her leave of him. In an instant his agitation was subdued ; the flush of passion vanished from his cheek, and he rose tall and angular to receive her adieu before departure.

" We are ready," she said in a faltering voice, as she made way for the nurse and baby to follow her into the room.

" We !" exclaimed Mr. Gifford in grave surprise ; " I presume Mrs. Gifford has not the indiscretion to think that the child can accompany her upon the journey ? "

" You—you did not say, sir, anything about the child," she answered very timidly, " and baby is too young to be left entirely."

"I do not think so."

"I thought, for a month or so, that you would let me have him—that he might by degrees be weaned from his mother. I was aware," she added, "that as it grew up it would be your place to see to his welfare, and his interest and duty to be with you; but I fancied, from your looks, that you did not wish to separate me from him yet."

"Madam, we have not quarrelled," he said, with a significant look towards the nurse; "incompatibility of temperament renders it necessary that we should live apart, but I have no intention of depriving you entirely of your son. At times, and when it is convenient, he shall see you, but for his own sake he must remain with me. I am the most fitting judge of what is best for him, I think—I know."

She accepted his covert reproach and sighed heavily. She knew all that it implied, and had not the courage to answer him, but her heart was strangely troubled, and her calmness or her resignation seemed to be deserting her. She thought that she had suffered enough, poor woman, and that Mr. Gifford was too hard upon her. And yet Mr. Gifford was only a just man, and felt that he was acting justly. He had been deceived, and to deceive him, of all men upon earth, was to inflict upon his pride a life-long injury.

"He will be well looked after here. Augusta will be like his second mother, and he was always fond of her."

"Yes; he will be taught to love you, Augusta, better than me, and in time—in time," she repeated, with a choking sob, "he will scarcely know who I am, when kept away too long from his mamma."

"Take the child up-stairs, nurse," said Mr. Gifford, unmoved by this evidence of the mother's sorrow.

"No, let it stay. I will mind it for a few minutes," said Augusta. The nurse put the baby into the aunt's lap, and left the room to inform her fellow-servants of the "kick up" that had ensued between her master and "missus."

Mr. Gifford frowned at his sister's interference with his orders, but he had not time to remonstrate just then. He was anxious, still terribly anxious, to avoid a scene, and get this woman who unfortunately bore his name out of the house, before she broke down, and pained him with her abandonment to grief.

"Augusta will write to you frequently concerning the child's health," he continued. "You shall have nothing to complain about; you shall be treated in every way that is fair and honourable. I have said it, and my word is not likely to be lightly broken."

"Yes, but—don't take his hat and cape off yet, Augusta, please," she cried wildly—"but you do not consider how young he is, sir—how a baby of his age is always tied up with the mother, and how fretting after her he loves most may seriously affect his health."

"You do not consider, Mrs. Gifford, my affection for the child, and how he is the only thing that I have left in the world to strive for and to love. You have not been deceived," he added tartly, "but have chosen your own path, and even your ignorance of the world could not have disguised from you the consequences of detection. My boy is not safe with one so weak, and I must watch over him for both those natural protectors he should have had."

"Oh, Augusta, I think you have forgiven me—at least you understand me, and have some woman's feeling for my position now. Speak for me," she entreated; "please say something to subdue this cruel resolution!"

Augusta would have spoken, when he checked her suddenly with that new fierceness which had already surprised her, and convinced her that, after all, he was not much above the standard of our poor humanity.

"I will not have it!" he shouted. "I will not listen longer to this weak, exaggerated sentiment.

Woman," to his wife, "you try me too much ; you will not understand that I am suffering too—that it is I who should have all the pity and you the shame of this, and that I am acting mercifully to let you go away without a curse upon you for all the evil of which you have been the cause. Do not seek to lower me by passion, but leave me to my desolation, and spare me your further presence here. If there be any sorrow at your heart for all the wrongs which you have heaped upon me, show it by leaving this unhappy house."

"If there be sorrow ! " cried Laura. " Oh, sir, if I could live back the past—if I could begin again from that night when you came home from Wilton, and I only told you half the truth ! You would not have forgiven me then, for the offence has grown no greater with delay ; but you would have put me from you with a gentler hand, and not thrust me from your doors without the one link that holds me on to life ! "

"To live back the past is impossible, Mrs. Gifford," said he, returning to his old demeanour so suddenly that one was doubtful if his past passion had not been assumed to affright her from his presence ; "and, therefore, regrets for time misspent and opportunities wasted are not worth the tears shed with them. To wail over one sin of omission may

be the first step to repentance ; but it is *not* repentance in the sight of Him, and you have sinned against Him as well as me. Let me ask you as a favour to withdraw ? ”

“ I will go,” she replied ; “ but if you would only say, sir, that you do not believe me wholly bad, that you judge me as the weak, vain, young wife, led a little aside from the right road, praying always to keep strong, and sorrowing now intensely for all the crime and misery her weakness has brought about ! ”

Mr. Gifford looked away from her ; he had nothing to answer to this appeal ; his feelings were not likely to be touched by her contrition or humility, and she could not understand—she would never understand, perhaps—the intensity of the blight which she had cast on him. For she had never loved him, and that fact stood between him and his forgiveness like a wall of iron. A woman who had once loved him, whom he had lost by neglect, by close application to those studies which were part of his profession, and in which she could not sympathise, he might have turned to at the eleventh hour ; but not to her who had persistently deceived him from the first. To wake to the consciousness that she had never cared for him was, as it seemed, to set her amongst the crowd of common folk, and merge her with all those whom he had ever coldly regarded from his vantage-ground.

"Oh, Mr. Gifford, I have enough to try me without your scorn," she urged still; "you will think more charitably of me when this passion has subsided."

"I am not passionate," he said quickly. "I—I am very cool, and my pulse does not beat any faster than its wont. You have no right to insult me by thinking that I am acting in hot haste."

"It is a hasty resolution that separates me from my child," she said; "you could not have thought of that before."

"Pardon me, but the boy was my first thought."

"Well, then," with a very long sigh, that echoed through the room, wherein the light was fading fast, "I will go away alone. It is your wish, and you are master here. But it is your promise that he—that he shall see me now and then?"

"Yes," was the hollow response.

"That seems to take a weight from me; and, Mr. Gifford, if you will presently look upon my errors as you have looked upon the errors of others from your pulpit sometimes when they lay not so close to your own door, and were less magnified in consequence, it will be fair to me, indeed it will. There, there, I will not say another word; you are justified in setting me apart from you, and I ask no mercy. I am going at once."

Still she lingered, although he had bowed his head in assent to this, and her distraught gaze wandered from child to husband and from husband to child, like a woman cast adrift and yet seeing two frail spars, to which she might have clung, for ever past her reach. She moved a few steps towards the door, and then went back again with a rush towards the baby, that had turned its head towards her and made a piteous face, as though the truth was guessed at last.

"Oh, my little Theo!" she wailed forth, "I am sure you will forget me—I am sure that you will be always kept away from me; they will not think of me ever again when I have gone!"

She covered his face with kisses, and sobbed at last with a violence that there was no restraining; and the man who had been wronged too deeply in his estimation for forgiveness, walked up and down the room with heavy strides, and let no one see his face. Suddenly, like the remorseless judge he was, he snatched the boy from them, and bore him away to the nursery, jealous of the love that he showed yet for the mother.

"See her, Augusta, to the carriage; she will go away now, if she has any thought for us," he cried, before he went up-stairs, and Laura Gifford rose, pale and trembling, and leaned on the arm of her old

rival for support. When he stole down presently, after giving the child to the nurse, he saw that she was in the carriage, and that Augusta was endeavouring to console her, and he went into the drawing-room and sat down in the full front of the fire there as though he were very cold, after the great storm which had shattered his household gods. He did not look up when the wheels grated on the gravel drive outside, and his second wife was borne away from him. He had not felt that present heart-ache, that soul-bitterness when his first wife—poor Edith, as he had called her—was carried away in her hearse, and he had followed in the mourning-coach, thinking how lonely the world looked through its windows. He had not been deceived in Edith as in this one, whom he could have followed to her grave a few days since, and mourned after for ever, but whom he could wish now had died before the truth had stripped him of his reverence for her. He was not aware that his sister was beside him until her sad voice echoed in his ears.

“She has gone, Theo.”

“Yes, I am glad,” he answered, with a groan.
“I think that you have been too hard, brother. I cannot help thinking and hoping that in the future you will act more generously towards her.”

“Think so, if you will, but do not distress me with

your thoughts," he said. "And until I change and tell you so, be silent concerning all that has occurred to-day."

"His death should have rendered you more merciful."

"I should have been more merciful if he had lived," he said sarcastically, "for then I should have obtained a divorce, if it were possible, and those fond lovers could have spent the remainder of their wretched lives in happiness, and have forgotten you and me."

"Oh, Theo, don't!" she cried. "Have some thought for others. You have had your way, and she is gone."

"Yes, she is gone," he said. "And if you will leave me to myself, I shall be better, much better. I have forgotten to tell you that Mrs. Martin has arrived at the Hall, and waits there anxiously for your sympathy."

"I will go to her. But you——"

"I have a great deal to do in my study presently," he answered—"letters to write, and to reply to. You will come to-morrow or the next day, when you can arrange matters, and take care of me again."

"Yes, Theo, if you wish it, willingly. I was afraid that in some way I had offended you too."

"No, not you. You have been always true to me," he said.

She stooped and kissed that broad white forehead before she left him, and when the door had closed he drew himself still closer to the fire. When she looked in upon him again he was sitting with his folded arms touching the mantelpiece, his head resting upon his arms, and his chair tilted forwards somewhat.

"I am going now, Theo," she said.

"Very well," he answered.

She went away slowly, as though doubtful if she could not be of use in dissipating that stubborn, darkling mood, and he bent over the fire and thought of all that had happened that day. He thought so deeply that the night was on him before he was aware, and the servant, entering long afterwards, was told harshly to withdraw again.

"The dinner, sir, is served in the dining-room."

"I have dined," he said sharply.

"Oh, indeed, sir. Shall I bring in the lamp, and—"

"Bring in nothing, but let me be."

The servant withdrew, and he sat there in the shadows as though he enjoyed them, and the fire-light flickering feebly and more feebly, as the

coals became hollow and cavernous, rendered his figure a strange distortion on the wall. It was his first experience of life without the woman whom he had loved, and perhaps there was a morbid satisfaction in beginning his new home thus, and in settling down to all the misery which in his pride and obstinacy he had insisted on.

Still he might have slept, worn out by the fatigue and excitement of the day, had it not been for the sudden rattling of a hand upon the window-glass. This caused him to drop back from his old position, as though ashamed of watchers on his brooding. He looked towards the window, before which no blind was drawn, and saw by the feeble red glare of the fire that a something with a white face, and eyes that seemed to glare at him, stood without upon his lawn.

He rose, hesitated, and then went slowly towards the window. He was not a superstitious man, but his blood ran coldly in his veins as he advanced, and the face pressed against the glass seemed to grow more familiar to him with each step that he made towards it. He came to a full stop at last, and gasped forth—

“Horace Essenden! It is his face, or I am going mad!”

Then the sash was shaken impatiently from with-

out, and, the bolt not having been firmly secured, the window gave way and opened.

"Keep back! What is it—who are you?" cried Mr. Gifford.

"It is I—Paul Essenden. You need not be afraid," said a deep voice, as the man advanced into the room.

"I am not afraid of any man," answered the minister, recovering himself. "What do you want with me?"

"Your help, Gifford, if you will give it me," was the reply.

CHAPTER THE SIXTH.

PAUL'S RETURN.

MR. GIFFORD went back to his chair by the fire, after Paul Essenden's entrance into the drawing-room, and Paul took a seat facing him.

"Why did you come in like this?" asked the rector tetchily.

"I thought that I would walk round the house, and make sure if you were here. I thought it possible that you might say 'not at home' if I knocked at the front door."

"I am not in the habit of lying, even for my convenience," said Mr. Gifford, more tartly than even his habit was to unwelcome visitors.

"You would have seen me, then? Thank you."

"I should have declined seeing you," was the reply. "I am not well—I am tired with a long journey."

"Yes, I know that," said Paul. "I saw you and my aunt, from the hotel window at Kliston."

"You have been staying at Kliston, then?"

"For a day or two. Had we not better have lights? I don't like sitting in the dark myself."

Mr. Gifford rang the bell, and Paul Essenden maintained silence until the lights were brought into the room, and the servant had retired. Mr. Gifford glanced askance at his unwelcome visitor, and wondered what he wanted with him; why he had sought him out in this eccentric fashion, as though they had been friends of long standing. When he had entered the house, he had spoken of requiring Gifford's help; but as he sat there he certainly appeared in no great hurry for it.

It was a moody face at which Gifford looked furtively—all the past brightness quenched from it, and replaced by a depth of thought and sadness natural to a man who had lost a brother dearly loved. When he had dropped the brigand-like hat to his feet, and thrust his hands in his pockets after the old fashion, he sat with his troubled looks directed to the hollow-burning fire, a strange figure in that room. With that graver aspect he seemed very like his brother, and we need not wonder at the rector's past surprise at a face so like the dead man's peering through the window glass.

"You were saying that you required my help," said Mr. Gifford. He was anxious to hear all that

Paul Essenden had to communicate, and then to bow him from his presence. The sooner this intruder on his own deep thoughts was gone the better. If the man could only know what troubles had crossed him that day—if he were only weak enough to speak of them, Paul Essenden would spare him and withdraw. But he could tell no one of his trials, of the desolation which stretched around him, and which he had chosen almost in defiance of the slanders that his wife's absence from his home would circulate in Deeneford.

“Yes; it is a painful story, though, and I have scarcely the courage to begin.”

Mr. Gifford groaned inwardly. A painful story—and he, who had enough misery of his own to last him to the judgment, to be expected to listen to it patiently! He made one feeble protest, but without avail.

“I am in no mood for painful stories, Mr. Essenden, to-night,” he said; “I have already told you that I am tired and ill.”

“Yes, yes, but this is nothing new, and I have a duty to fulfil which cannot take into consideration your sense of illness or fatigue. I understand you, Mr. Gifford, and am sorry—more sorry than you would care for me to express—for your own particular and undeserved misfortunes.”

"I am not aware that any particular misfortune has occurred to me," was the cold reply.

"She has left you—poor woman—has she not?"

Mr. Gifford changed colour at this, and the blood that rose to his face seemed to burn itself in for a while with the anger that consumed him. After all his care and his coolness, to find the first man whom he encountered, and that man almost a stranger to him, sitting down at his fireside and calling his wife "poor woman."

"How—how dare you think or say——" he began, and then he paused to struggle with his utterance. Paul Essenden had moved him more than all the trials of that afternoon, and the rector was amazed at his visitor's audacity.

"It is of no use evading a subject like this," said Paul, with his old bluntness of expression developing itself somewhat, "however delicate it may be. I am not a delicate man, and you and I have a great deal to face before my brother's death dies out of the memory of the people here. I have come to talk the matter over with you."

"What are you to me?" asked Gifford sharply. "Why do you link our names together in this manner?"

"You have lost a wife whom you loved, and I a brother who was dear to me. You lost your faith

in her at the time that I lost my faith in him ; and we are linked together in sorrow by the death of one who might have lived to become a better man."

"I am not linked to you by any tie springing from his death," said Gifford, still angrily.

"You have not forgiven him, then ?" said Paul in surprise. "Is it possible that the grave cannot cancel your injuries ?"

"No, sir ; it cannot."

"Then such a mind as yours is beyond my fathoming. I thought you were a Christian."

"Knowing how he sought to injure me, do you expect me to grieve for him ?"

"I think that my injuries were as great as yours, but, Horace," he said sadly, "I hope that there is peace between us now."

"Your injuries !" said Mr. Gifford, with a sneer.

"He meant harm to you, but he was not successful," replied Paul, "hence your injuries may be recovered from. But, Mr. Gifford, he has blasted my whole life, taken away the one hope that I have ever had, and left me not one chance of happiness !"

"I do not understand," said Mr. Gifford. "Was he a traitor to you too ? Was every action of his life——"

"No matter, sir," interrupted Paul; "he did not consider the consequences—he did not know of them. He never thought, poor fellow! and so from step to step downwards, hoping that in good time he should be strong enough to turn back. I did not think he was so weak until that villain told me all the truth in his mad rage that day."

"George Carr?"

"Yes, George Carr."

"Did he seek you out also?"

"Yes."

"Where is he now?"

"I do not know. I hope that I shall find him," said Paul, "and drag him from his hiding-place. I—I can have no mercy, surely, on that man, despite his sense of injuries received. I feel that I hate him very bitterly, and that my hate will run him to earth, for all his cunning."

"And yet that man saved your life, I have heard."

"Ay, but he took Horace's. And after all, my brother was a good fellow at heart. He only wanted one true friend to make him all that was good and honourable."

"I was his true friend once."

"Oh, you wouldn't have done," said Paul, without much consideration for the feelings of his listener.

“Perhaps I might, for he liked me, if I had been a firm, reasonable sort of fellow, and had been with him more often, instead of wandering over the world, losing my chances with his own. And to think my last words were a curse upon him for all the harm that he had unintentionally done me—that he even knelt at my feet, and I would not forgive him, but was as hard as you are, and that when I was still reproaching him in my heart, I heard of his murder in the wood !”

He took his hands from his pockets to dash the hot tears from his eyes ; he sprang from the chair to pace the room ; he sat down again nearer to the man whose feelings were not touched by his regrets, but who nursed his wrongs, and let them gnaw away the goodness that had been once at his heart.

Theobald Gifford was quite certain that there was an immensity of misery within him, which rendered Paul Essenden’s grief poor by comparison. He could have laughed wildly at this man giving way to grief; he could have turned upon him with a passion tenfold greater than his own, and bade him not sing in his ears the praises of one who had deeply injured him, and for whom in his shroud he had no pity. He said calmly, however—

“Where did you see your brother last ?”

"At Kliston. I met him there, and we quarrelled for the first and last time in our lives."

"I am sorry for that," said Mr. Gifford at last; "they will hear of it, and you will be suspected."

"They have heard of it already, and I am suspected," answered Paul. "It serves me right; I should have had more mercy on him, and not have added to his trouble on that awful day. I don't know that I should care much if they hanged me for his murder—if the evidence closed round me and shut me in with it. What good am I in the world?"

"You are young, you have strength, you will form new ties and forget all this," said Mr. Gifford, more enviously, perhaps, than with any intention of offering comfort to Paul in his tribulation; "the world lies before you, and the past may presently be to you nothing more than a bad dream."

Paul shook his head.

"No, that is not likely. I shall not study myself. I only did, for that matter, once, and then I made a mess of it," he added ruefully; "but I should like for a little while to study some one else. That is why I want your help, Mr. Gifford."

He was coming round to the motive which had brought him there, and which, in his defence of Horace, he had forgotten for awhile.

"In what way is it possible for me to help you?"

"Simply by holding your tongue," replied Paul, "and sparing the old lady at the Hall some unpleasant truths. She is heart-broken enough, without fresh facts to dismay her, and you are her friend as well as mine."

"I do not see in what way I can assist you, Mr. Essenden."

"I will tell you. My aunt, as you know, was wrapped up in the virtues of her nephew. He was her idol, and he took the place of her own son, and was loved very much. She never knew harm of my brother Horace, but thought him the best and most honourable of men: let her think so still."

"It is impossible that she can think so for long, or that I can assent to this. Sir, you offer me an insult by asking me to make that man a hero, and to join in so contemptible a deception!"

"Think what you will of Horace, Mr. Gifford; you have a right, perhaps, to pass sentence on him in your mind, for he has injured you; but I am pleading in the defence of your friend, Mrs. Martin. It will be a comfort in her last years to know no wrong of Horace—to look back at him as the man who loved her, who had a fault or two which were not conspicuous, and which even took him to her

side for her advice at times—the man whom the world thought passing clever, and whom everybody seemed to love as well as she. Let her keep him in the bright light wherein he always stood in her eyes, and let us over his sins, poor fellow, draw the veil of charity. For the old lady's sake, Mr. Gifford, if you please!"

"I cannot help you in this matter," said Mr. Gifford, folding his arms; "things must take their course without my interference."

"But you will not interfere, at any rate?"

"I make no promise."

"Then, sir, favour me by keeping from the Hall. I respect your sorrow, but you must respect ours," said Paul firmly. "Not even you, after this night, must say a word against my brother in my hearing, or out of it. I hold you responsible."

"I am not to be silenced by a threat, Mr. Essenden," was the quick answer. "And if I am to be told presently that your brother was a man of honour, I shall not assent to it."

"You would be less than a man to add to an old woman's agony," said Paul. "The shock would kill her, for she was very proud of him. Your silence will be honourable. You have kept silence hitherto, I believe, and I cannot believe that it is worth your while to tell everybody

the reasons which have parted you and Mrs. Gifford."

Mr. Gifford rose to terminate the interview. It was *not* worth his while to tell everybody of the reasons for his separation from his wife, but he did not care to be lectured thus by an intruder. He could not endure an allusion to his own trouble, for he fancied a grief like his should have been held sacred by them all, and that more consideration might have been shown him. He had not spared Paul Essenden; but Paul Essenden might have spared him, was the morbid, selfish idea of this singular being, in the first turmoil following his home's disruption.

"I am the best judge of my own affairs," he said, "and if you have any gentlemanly feeling for my distress, you will not pain me by further conversation."

"I have no more to say," replied Paul, taking up his hat and rising also; "you understand the object of my intrusion, Mr. Gifford, and to-morrow you will see this in the same light as myself and your sister."

"My sister?"

"Yes, I met her going to the Hall. I asked her to prepare my aunt for my coming, and I gave her that warning which I have recently given you.

She understood me at once, like a sensible girl as she is. Mrs. Martin will always think that Horace would have married your sister, had he lived; it spares everybody explanation, and saves her much unavailing sorrow."

"I will not resume the subject," said Mr. Gifford, compressing his lips and frowning. "I will not be tormented by further discussion to-night. Pray retire by the way you entered, and do not worry me more. You should be able to see that I am not myself."

"Yes, I have seen that," answered Paul, "and it excuses all that you have said, though you have not spared me in my turn. Good-night."

"Good-night."

Paul offered his hand, but Mr. Gifford did not or would not see it, and he passed out of the window, which the rector immediately secured behind him, lest a new idea should lead his late visitor to come back to him.

Paul walked slowly homewards, keeping to the middle of the road, and there were those about that night who noticed his return, and spread the news through Deeneford. One man met him close to his home, and stepped before him, and Paul took his right hand from his pocket, like a man prepared for defence.

"I beg pardon; but Mr. Paul Essenden, I think?"

"Yes," said Paul.

"I had the pleasure of seeing you in Kliston yesterday morning, at the Royal Hotel, I believe?"

"No, you had not," answered Paul, "although I was there, and met my brother Horace; but then you were in London, and not sent for."

The detective officer appeared surprised for a moment, and after a minute's consideration replied—

"Yes."

"You do not want any fresh evidence to prove my being at the hotel, my man; the waiters and the landlord will be happy to afford you every information. Good-evening."

The man stood looking after him for awhile, and finally burst forth with—

"Well, if he did it, he's a cool hand, at any rate!"

Meanwhile the cool hand had been admitted into the house, and had directed the servant to inform Miss Gifford that he had arrived. The message was delivered in the drawing-room, and Augusta turned to the grey-haired lady in the chair, and laid her hand on hers.

"Did you hear, Mrs. Martin?" she said.

"No, I heard nothing. What is it, dear?"
Mrs. Martin replied, looking up.

"Paul is home again."

"When will he be here?" she asked eagerly.
"Is he on the road?"

"He is in the house. Are you strong enough to see him?"

"Yes, I am very strong," she answered.

The door opened, and as Paul entered the tall old lady rose, and would have walked across the room to him had he not met her half-way and put his arms round her.

"Oh, Paul, you have come back, then?"

"Yes. Don't cry—don't say another word, aunt."

"Never to leave me any more—to take his place, and, by your likeness to him, to let me think he lives again in you?"

"Yes, I will be the good fellow that he was, if I can."

He had begun his difficult task at once, and he would have said more than was necessary in his eagerness had she not interrupted him quickly with a question.

"Have they found the murderer?"

"Not yet."

"Was it that man Carr?—I see nothing but his

awful face still. Did he think that Horace, our generous Horace, had been in any way the cause of his daughter's imprisonment?"

"He might have thought so; he was a strange man," answered Paul.

She was full of her one subject, and would not leave it, despite their efforts to turn the conversation, until she had broken down completely.

"You must rest, aunt," said Paul; "we must have no more of this to-night. There, Miss Gifford and I will see you to your room, and she will stay for another hour I hope."

He looked wistfully at Augusta for her reply, and when she answered Yes, he thanked her gratefully. He offered his arm to the old lady, but as she walked with difficulty, he passed his strong arm round her waist to support her, and guided her every step with a care and gentleness strangely at variance with his past character.

"There, there, to-morrow you will be better, and more reconciled," he said, kissing her at her room door as he committed her to Augusta's care. "This is such a new and bitter sorrow."

"It is the will of heaven," murmured the gentlewoman, bowing low, "and I submit to it, Paul. Will you?"

"Yes," he answered sadly.

"You are strong—I am glad to see that you bear up against this blow."

"Oh, I am a man—I never felt things acutely," he said hurriedly; "I had not his deep feelings, poor fellow. But good-night. Try and rest, mother, if you can."

He called her by the name of mother for the first time in his life, to express his future devotion to her, if she wished it, and then he went slowly along the corridor, hoping that she would not presently think that he had come back for her money.

"If she only knew," he muttered, "the struggle that it is to sink to this life, and I so eager to forget in action all the miserable past!"

He went straight to his brother's room, taking a lamp from a bracket in the wall, and entering with it to the side of that still form which yesterday had been full of life and error, and now was past them both. He had never been a prayerful man, but he set the lamp aside and knelt there for awhile, until the strong, hard man was like a child in his great grief.

"If I had only said one word of kindness to you, Horace, yesterday," he murmured. Then he took up his lamp, went from the room again, locked the door after him, and kept possession of the key. As he went along the corridor he said aloud, "No, Carr—old friend, new enemy—I cannot pardon this!"

CHAPTER THE SEVENTH.

GIFFORD'S DEPARTURE.

THERE was an inquest held next day at Deeneford, and the whole village was astir. Opportunities for gossip and opportunities for drink at the Deeneford Arms were frequent, and there was no settling down to business that day. There was an adjournment for three days, after much confabulation, an examination of witnesses, and a visit of the jury to Deeneford Hall; and the facts that had oozed out at the first meeting, and were printed next day in the *Kliston Herald*, were sensational enough to satisfy the hungerers for news, though they were bewildering to all who studied them.

Paul Essenden kept the *Kliston Herald* from Mrs. Martin, who was not curious to see it, and who only asked once a day whether the murderer of her dear boy had been discovered yet. Not that the *Kliston Herald* would have shed much light upon the mystery, but Augusta Gifford had to depose to having seen the deceased on the afternoon of the

murder, and a second time in the wood, a few minutes before his death, standing in conversation with Mrs. Gifford. She deposed also to Horace Essenden betraying great excitement and eccentricity on that afternoon he had visited her, and to following him into the shrubbery, after his parting with her sister-in-law, to speak to him again. Here she hesitated somewhat, and when questioned as to the finding of the body, she gave way and was carried out of court. The inquest was adjourned, as Mrs. Gifford had not condescended to make her appearance, and messengers were despatched to the rectory, and finally to Wilton, to demand her presence on the next occasion. But she came not on the second or third adjournment, for a certificate from Dr. Rivers was put in that she was unable to attend, and that to harass her in her present state of mind might prove dangerous to her life. She was very ill, and could not be disturbed; but the coroner waited patiently day after day; and in the interim Horace Essenden was buried, carried to his father's vault at Wilton churchyard, and facts accumulated, and grew more complicated with their growth.

There were too many facts, the detectives said, and half-a-dozen people might have been arrested on suspicion. There was a reward of one hundred

pounds offered by Government for the murderer, and a second and a heavier sum by Mrs. Martin's solicitors, and the police worked on carefully, and made no undue haste.

Meanwhile, people began to comment upon the various statements that had found their way into print—statements which had cropped up from the evidence before the coroner, and statements that were founded on rumours which had not been thoroughly sifted, but were biding their time to be proved false or true. There were long-headed folk who thought Augusta Gifford had more to say, and would be compelled to say more if ever the case came into a court of justice; who were not quite certain that the rector's sister had not been jealous of the rector's wife, and found strength—in a mad fit of rage, perhaps—to strike her lover down. There were long-eared people who thought Horace Essenden had killed himself: fallen forwards, cut his head against a stone, and so let out his life's blood before assistance could arrive to him. There were others who saw the murderer in Paul Essenden—a ne'er-do-well, who had never borne in Deeneford the best of characters, and had been once turned out of doors by the aunt who now protected him. The story of his meeting with his brother at Kliston was against him, and the people in the

hotel could speak to high words exchanged between Paul and Horace, and to Horace leaving in hot haste on horseback, with his brother calling after him that never in all his life would he forgive him. But this was all that could be proved against Paul Essenden. He had remained at the hotel for half an hour afterwards—an hour, or an hour and a quarter, according to the varying statements of the lackeys—and then had not been seen till a late hour. Finally, a turn was given to the various theories respecting the end of Horace, by the sudden news that a girl had been found in a back street in Whitechapel to swear to a man named Essenden calling upon a woman named Wisby—since deceased—and to that man being followed in disguise by a second, who was heard to say that he would be revenged on Horace Essenden for putting his daughter into prison. Here the right clue seemed found at last, and everybody puzzled by the mystery and interested in it drew a breath of relief in consequence. Link by link it all led up to George Carr, alias Hewitt, a dangerous man, who had recently served out a long sentence in a penal settlement, and was back again to prey upon society. The witness Kitty—she only knew her name was Kitty—did not understand the nature of an oath, and confused matters in the beginning of this fresh

evidence; but there were stealthy trackers, who found out that the man had vowed revenge on Horace Essenden to more than Mrs. Wisby, and that Mr. Gifford and Paul Essenden had both been listeners to his threats of vengeance. Both these new witnesses were blamed for not mentioning this fact before, and both answered that they did not feel justified at an early stage of proceedings in calling attention to the rash speech of one who had suffered much, and might not know what he was saying. It was all very singular, and the world could not understand the story. It was sure that there was something more behind, which would come out in good time, unless the police slackened in their vigilance and suffered the culprit to escape. Everybody under examination seemed to struggle to keep something back, and there was more than one decisive refusal to answer questions which, it was said, affected private interests and private feelings, and had nothing to do with the grave charge hanging over George Carr's head. When it was ascertained at last that a man at Deeneford could swear to seeing Carr in the shubbery on the afternoon of the murder—a man who had been in his employ when he held the Upland Farm—it was settled that the coroner's verdict should be "Wilful Murder against George Carr," and that the reward

for some person unknown should be changed to a reward for one against whom society would have no mercy if a second time secured.

So time went on, and the winter came to Deeneford. Mrs. Gifford, it was rumoured, was better in health, and a few unsuspecting ones—amongst whom was Mrs. Martin—thought that she would soon be back in Deeneford, restored by the native air which, after the shock, she had been probably recommended to seek out. But they who suspected everything—and their names were legion—knew that Mrs. Gifford and her husband had separated for ever; that there had been a quarrel, and that neither Mr. nor Mrs. Gifford had been well since. The former had not been strong enough to preach or pray, although he had attempted once and broken down in the face of his congregation, who had streamed out of church at a quarter to twelve, to talk over his collapse in the churchyard. Mr. Gifford would not own that it was a collapse; he should be better in a few weeks, after a little change of air and scene. He was annoyed at his own failures in the face of his flock, at his own changed looks, sallow and woe-begone, like a man fretting after his wife, or one whose own iron will had pressed into his soul and was killing him. He would go to his solicitors and hasten on the deed of separation, which he wished

drawn up with great formality ; he would proceed to London and see what could be done in Nella Carr's case—whether the father's guilt would set the daughter in a sinister light, and prevent all commutation of her sentence, or simply arouse a feeling of greater pity for her. He would avail himself of his influence, as he had promised Carr, and the excitement of this business away from Deeneford would bring him back to his old self, he said.

Never to his old self, thought Augusta ; the time would not come again, unless by a miracle his heart could change. He had not been loved by Laura Gifford, and therefore she was never to be forgiven, though happiness without her could not be. Without her he had aged, become more irritable in his worst moods, and more full of heavy thought in his best ; and the boy, whom he had not allowed to go to Wilton for awhile, he did not care to look at—he was so like his mother. In the library he read his Bible very often, but it did not take one shadow from his face, or teach him to be lenient in his estimation of his fellow-creatures' actions. He had spoken in his lifetime a great deal of man's duty to his fellow-men, of looking charitably at human weaknesses, and extending the hand of forgiveness to him or her who had done a grievous wrong ; but when the wrong had come home to himself, it

seemed as if the application were set aside, or distorted to meet his own peculiar views. We are all the same when the shaft is winged at us, and our pet theories, our famous moralisings, shiver 'neath the touch of the great test. It is the law of our poor humanity; but heaven help the minister, for he had always thought himself above it!

Mr. Gifford went to London, and his sister watched him depart, and prayed silently that he would bring back at least some part of his old self, if it were only the old self-possession or self-complacency. She had accepted the position now almost as completely as Laura Gifford had, and looked not forward to man and wife exchanging the kiss of peace again. In the early days she had believed in the efficacy of time, the potency of past associations, the natural goodness at the heart of each of them; but whilst he looked like that—and it seemed as though that hard expression would never melt away, and she should see it some day in his coffin—there was no hope of better times.

Mr. Gifford had not left for London above three hours, when a man called about a gardener's place that had been promised him, and seemed vexed to have missed the master, after tramping five miles from the next village in search of him.

"Pr'aps the lady inside may know summat on it,"

the old man said, scratching his grey head in his dilemma, "if ye'll ask, please."

The servant put the question, but Miss Gifford had not heard her brother speak of changing his gardener, and went into the hall to express her regret at the man's long walk, and his disappointment at the end of it. She was somewhat surprised, also, at Theo's resolution, although prepared for eccentricities of this kind, and she wondered, with a sigh, whether her brother was anxious to weed out by degrees all the old faces that had been about him in the second wife's time. The servant followed her and looked over her shoulder at the man, who had taken his seat in the hall, and was coughing violently with the exertion of his long walk. A feeble old man, whose services would be scarcely worth the trouble of securing, Augusta thought, although she informed him, with that kindness of tone which goes so far into the hearts of subordinates, that she would write to Mr. Gifford if he wished it, and let him know in the course of a few days the nature of her brother's reply.

"But I ha' been engaged, marm," said the gardener, "and doant like this way of bein' treated. Ha'e ye a pen and ink that I may roight a bit myself?"

"Certainly," said Miss Gifford. "Show him into

the waiting-room, Mary, and find him writing materials. He would like a glass of ale, perhaps, also."

"Ay, marm, thankee, I should," answered the man for himself.

Augusta returned to the sitting-room, but sat down to write a letter to her brother at the hotel where she knew that he would be staying presently; and whilst in the middle of her epistle, she was somewhat alarmed by finding that the drawing-room door was opening stealthily behind her. She had heard it creak before looking over her shoulder, and now she was on her feet, trembling a little with surprise. Strange things had happened lately, and she was more easily unnerved ; her brother was absent, the servants always knocked before entering, and there was an old man in the house who might not be quite sane, for all that she knew to the contrary.

It was the old man who entered, who closed the door, and came towards her in a hasty manner as she backed towards the window.

"Miss Gifford," he said in a hurried and excited voice, "don't be dismayed at the sight of me again. I have felt that I must see you before they hunt me down, or I escape them. In mercy listen to me, if you can ! "

"George—Carr!" she gasped forth, leaning for

support against the window in her horror at him.
“ You, of all men in the world, to come to me ?
You dare—you dare to thus defy me ? ”

Her growing indignation at his appearance robbed her of past terror, and she struggled from her weakness and went across the room towards the bell-rope hanging by the mantelpiece. There was a quick movement of the hand which caught her wrist and stopped her.

“ What would you do ? ” he said.

“ Alarm the house, and denounce you.”

Her heart beat rapidly again, but her bright eyes looked him steadily in the face, as though he was a wild beast that she could daunt by looking at.

“ Presently you shall, if you wish,” he said coolly ; “ he was your lover, and no one has a greater right to give me up to those who are seeking for me. But you must hear me first.”

“ Why should I listen to so great a villain—so cruel and bloodthirsty a coward as you are ? You killed Horace Essenden—and you come to me for safety ! ”

“ No, I do not come for safety—there you misunderstand my motives,” he said, relaxing his hold of her. “ It matters not, after all, so far as I am concerned, whether I am dead or alive. My days of peace are closed, and I would as soon end them on

the gallows as in my bed, if it were not for Nella. Madam," he said very humbly, "I have come hundreds of miles to see you and your brother; I have thought of nothing but you two, who have been kind to Nella—of you whom she loved so much, and will always love if you will let her. May I speak of her before you give me up? For heaven's sake, let me speak!"

"Go on, sir," said Augusta, "I am listening."

CHAPTER THE EIGHTH.

IN TRUST FOR NELLA.

GEORGE CARR did not immediately address Augusta Gifford after having obtained permission to address her. He stood on the hearth-rug gazing at her intently, almost sadly, like a man who was sorry for all the desolation of which he had been the cause ; and glancing once at his rugged face, Augusta felt that under other circumstances she might have pitied him. Then the consciousness of what an utter villain he was, and how terrible had been his vengeance upon all who had marred his life, stole over her with a sense of heart-sickness, that led her to sink back into the chair by the fireside.

He watched her very closely ; he drew a chair almost unconsciously towards himself whilst watching her, and seated himself upon it ; then he turned his eager eyes towards her and commenced.

“ Miss Gifford,” he said, “ I have come to plead for her, to beg you to remember her in that large-hearted generosity which you have always shown,

and which has hallowed your name to that poor suffering one. She is not to blame, and you, I hope, will not be hard upon her, or think that it is better now to turn away from her for ever."

"What do you expect from me?" asked Augusta—"what can you expect, after all that has occurred? Did you take into consideration, in your awful malice, the misery that would fall to my share? I—I don't think that I can bear to hear you say another word!"

"Pray keep strong," he urged. "I am not speaking for myself, and I am in your hands, to accept any fate which you think that I deserve, and from which I will make no effort to escape. I have promised that."

"All that can be done for your daughter will be done," said Augusta. "My brother went away this day to keep his promise to her."

"Yes, yes," he replied impatiently, "but your brother is not yourself, and I have not—she has not," he corrected, "much faith in him. It is of you that she will think and to whom she will turn; it is for you that she will grieve in her cell if she never hears from you, and your face sheds not a gleam of light within her prison walls. Madam, she has lived for you so long, that it will break her heart to think you care no more for her. Do not

visit my sins upon the head of one who sins not, and yet suffers much—but, for her sake, be merciful !”

The man’s earnestness was very touching, and for an instant Augusta Gifford forgot his crime, and the price set upon his head.

“I have no intention of forgetting Nella,” she said; “my sorrows have not hardened my heart to hers. But I will promise nothing—and least of all,” she cried indignantly, “will I pledge one word to you.”

He would have knelt before her in his gratitude and new humility, had she not sprung to her feet with chest heaving and eyes dilating at him. Once again he was the murderer of Horace Essenden !

“Don’t stoop to me—don’t thank me, villain—but go ! I—I feel that I ought to have your blood for his, and that it is unwomanly and cowardly to let you steal from here, the wretch you are ! If you remain, my resolution changes, and I give you up !”

“My life is worth nothing,” said Carr, unmoved by her words, “and if you desire it, take it. It does not seem to me natural that you should let me escape—for you loved him. Nella knew that you loved that man,” he added thoughtfully.

He could think of nothing but his daughter ; she

stood foremost in all his trains of thought to keep his mind to one idea.

"I don't care for life—I feel that I shall never see Nella again, and that it will be better for all to be ended before they let her out of prison. You could break to her by degrees the fact that *he* was dead, and that I had been hanged for killing him. It would have become a story of the past by the time that she was free, and all would have been settled in the name of justice."

"Man, why will you talk to me like this?" she cried, her hand wandering once more to the bell-rope.

He observed the action, but made no second effort to stop her. He sat with his head bowed before her in deep thought, prepared for her revenge. She paused once more and said—

"You knew, too, that he was dear to me?"

"Yes, I knew that. At the last—when it was too late—I remembered it."

"And you were sorry that you killed him! Let me hear you say, Carr, that you are repentant for your awful crime—that it was not murder, rather a quarrel, which in the heat of passion led to blows between you, and that in self-defence you struck him down? Sometimes," she said wildly, "I think that you could not have been cruel enough to slay

him unarmed and unsuspecting of your presence near him."

"Do you think so charitably of me even now?" he said, with a grateful look towards her. "Well, I thank you for those thoughts, madam. Nella was right—you are nearer the angels than the rest of us, and it is not you who should bear the burden of this great calamity. I am sorry for his death, intensely sorry; and, Miss Gifford, it was a madman's hasty blow that levelled him to earth, not the act of an assassin."

"Heaven forgive you!" said Miss Gifford, shuddering.

"Amen," groaned George Carr.

"And now depart," urged Augusta. "I—I cannot give you up, or step between you and your repentance; but go—I cannot endure the sight of you," she added with a shudder, "his blood seems red upon your hands still! If there is any respect or pity for me in your heart, you will leave me without another word."

"Not without a word of gratitude."

"I cannot listen to it," she cried.

"Not without a hope that you will take this money in trust for Nella, till she is free again. I dare never see her from this time—I pass away

from her life completely—I am heard of no more, madam!"

He drew a pocket-book from his coat; but she screamed at him to desist. She would do nothing else, accept no office from him; she waved her hand towards the door before she sank back in her chair again, and then the room, with that wild figure confronting her, swam round her till her eyes closed.

When she recovered herself the room was empty, and the pocket-book, swollen with notes, lay on her lap—the man's reply to her last protest.

CHAPTER THE NINTH.

AT THE PRISON.

IT was striking two by the clock of a great London prison. Chapel was over, the morning's work was done, the dinner had been served, and in most instances consumed, and the female prisoners in their separate cells had resumed work, and were counting the time between their coir-picking and their cruel hour, when they should see a human face once more.

One woman had not resumed work, but sat in her cell with a pale, patient face, that was touching, and, even for a prison-house, strange in its expressive sadness. A prisoner that the authorities might have trotted out to visitors, as a show-woman—a something peculiar to prisons; an extraordinary being, who made no complaints, attempted no evasion of the rules or deception of her officers, who seemed to silently admire the separation system in that establishment, and to whom no desperate re-

action came in the shape of an outbreak, and a mad dash at the glass, to make amends for months of self-repression. This was a prisoner evidently resigned to her sentence, and accepting it as a just one: not a morbid captive either, but one who returned the smiles of her officers when they were offered to her—and they were not unfrequent—and whose saddest expression was for the time when the door was closed for good, and she felt sure that no watchful eyes were glaring through the “inspection” at her.

This was a prisoner whom the newspapers had not yet forgotten, although she believed herself long ago shut out from the world’s interest. Her story had been a strange one, and strange things had followed it, and had even for a time influenced public opinion against her. Then had set in fresh evidence in her favour from country folk who had received her charity, and witnessed her true religious feeling; followed by letters from people of position in the county who had known the woman well, and who were for ever memorialising the State and not taking No for an answer, but simply considering it as a courteous “put off” for the present until the next memorial was got up, and further proof as to the extenuating circumstances of the case was offered to that gentleman high in office, who was naturally

slow to move after the sentence had been pronounced by an impartial judge.

The official world was perplexed by this never-ending subject of Nella Carr, and puzzled to account for the newspaper articles which were for ever turning up with singular persistency, and constantly directing attention to the prisoner. It was disturbed by various letters which people wrote to prove the good character of one who had begun her prison life, and doubtful how to treat two gentlemen who were always arriving with fresh memorials and fresh introductions ; one of whom was the rector of Deeneford—though he did not appear to attend to his duties much—and the other a gentleman who, it was reported, was the brother of the man who had been murdered in Deeneford Park.

The world was still astir in Nella Carr's favour, though Nella, in her cell, knew nothing of the world. All had been a blank to her since the day of the trial at Kliston ; she had not asked for information, and no information had been given her. After her arrival at the London prison she had written one letter to Miss Gifford, on the day allowed by the rules for prisoners' letter-writing, begging her to communicate with her father, with whose address she thought the old friend might be acquainted. In that letter she had expressed her resignation to her

fate, her consciousness of keeping strong under adversity, and her faith to look forward to her release ; and she mentioned to both friend and father that after six months had expired one visit would be allowed to those who wished for it. And now it was six months to the day, and Nella Carr was wondering whether any one would recollect that fact as well as she did. She was doubtful if she could bear to see past faces and meet the sorrow on them ; but she was hopeful, too, that they would come—in a few days at the farthest, however painful the interview might be. She would try to keep strong in order that her father—of whom she thought the most—should keep strong too, and not give way to that excitement which was natural to his character. He, poor fellow, must learn resignation from her, and bow to the Divine Hand that had set aside for the nonce all the little hopes that they had built upon together.

It might be better for herself if they came not to wring her heart by their sympathy ; but still she hoped that they would come, just as, in circumstances reversed, she would have gone to any one of them. She would have remembered the earliest day and hour eligible for visitors—even that two o'clock chiming from the brazen bell in the yard—and would have been ringing at the great outer

gates, and putting in her claim to an admittance.

She leaped up with a bosom throbbing restlessly, as the matron's key rattled in the lock and the door was opened quickly afterwards.

"Carr," said the officer, "visitors have come to see you—are you ready?"

"To see me!" said Nella. "Oh! yes, I am ready, Miss Richardson—quite ready," and then she reached out her hand to the wall in order to steady herself before proceeding another step.

"I hope you feel strong enough, Carr?" was the quick but kind inquiry.

"Oh, yes, I am very strong, thank you," said Nella; "I—I am quite prepared. May I be allowed to ask who the visitors are?"

"A lady and a gentleman."

They were Augusta Gifford and her father, she hoped; she would have liked to see the minister also, but she prayed that he had not come instead of her father, whose grief-stricken face had haunted her from the day that it had turned towards her, when her sentence had been pronounced by the judge at the assizes. She wished to see him, to know all about him—what he was doing without her, and how he, completely alone in the world, endured his isolation; and she felt that it was he who had reckoned up the

days between them, and had come with Miss Gifford at the very hour that the law allowed him for an interview.

In her white cap, brown serge dress, and blue check apron—the uniform of her penal servitude—Nella Carr followed the matron to the reception-room, and passed, with steps that grew less faltering beneath her will, to the front of the wire screen which separated her from a passage between the visitors and herself.

They should see that she was not agitated by this meeting, and thus her calmness should set an example to them, by which she hoped to stand her ground until the twenty minutes' grace had stolen past and left her to her blank life again. She did not look up at once; the matron on duty sitting in the compartment between the prisoner and her friends, stared gravely before her; and the man and woman on the liberty side of the establishment stood for awhile silent also, their hearts wrung by the figure beyond the grating, and too full as yet to speak to her.

Nella slowly raised her head at last, and looked across at her friends with a strange, forced smile, which they returned, and then Miss Gifford's voice said gently—

“ Well, Nella, you are well, I hope?”

Nella did not answer. Her hands clutched at the grating for an instant in her intense surprise, and then the colour mantled to her face and was a long while dying out.

"Paul—Mr. Essenden!" she murmured.

Yes, it was the old lover by Miss Gifford's side; he who had gone away in sadness from her, and whom she had never thought to see again. Whom she had never wished to see, now that all the truth was known respecting her, and she could not look him in the face. Why had Paul come to pain her thus by his sad presence, she thought, when he must have felt that it would have been merciful to stay away? She did not want his pity, his sympathy with her position, and her heart bled to feel that he was gazing at her through the prison wires. She could only remember—and he, standing there, should have thought of that and spared her—that in their last meeting she was to him all that was good and pure, and, as he had phrased it, the one hope which he had ever set his heart upon, and that now she was serving out a long sentence in a convict prison. It seemed only yesterday that the sun was shining on them, and the summer lingering in the home-close where he had told his love, and for his sake she had murmured No to him; only yesterday the brightness of that passion rendering her proud

and happy, for all her calm refusal of his love; and now the gaol gloom, where no ray of light would steal to her, and wherein he strained his eyes to see the misty vision in which he had once had faith. If he had stopped away—sent a kind message and so have done with her—how much better for himself and her. If he had for ever stood apart from her life, as he had promised that he would—if he had only kept his word!

There was a long silence between them, and the matron glanced curiously for an instant from the prisoner to the prisoner's friends. Such an interview as this was new to her. As a rule, the conversation was loud and incessant, and the visitors were full of news—even full of covert hints, which had to be repressed by the stern commands of authority before the twenty minutes had elapsed; but here there was a dead stillness, with the prisoner standing with her hands before her face, and the friends looking sadly at her, but saying never a word. The man in deep mourning was very pale, the matron thought, and she wondered, being a woman with the poetry of life not quite ground out of her by hard service under Government, if that man had ever loved the sorrowful figure beyond his reach, and at which he gazed so earnestly.

Miss Gifford was the first to speak again, although

her question still remained unanswered. The silence had become embarrassing, and she noticed, with a little surprise, that Nella pressed her face more and more closely to her hands, as if for ever to shut them both away from her, and that the thin hands trembled very much.

"I thought that I would take advantage of the first day allowed for visiting you, Nella," said Miss Gifford, "and Mr. Essenden, being in London also, was kind enough to escort me here."

She spoke in a matter-of-fact, gentle tone, that was reassuring to her listener, whose hands shook less as the voice of her old friend—the old saviour—fell upon her ears again.

"I—I thought that Mr. Gifford would have come with you—or perhaps my father," said Nella very slowly. She did not wish her voice to betray her excitement if she could help it, and yet it was scarcely under her control. And she wished to imply at once to Paul that she had not dreamed of his visit, had not hoped ever to see him, or to be pained by his pity. Her thoughts were in confusion still, and she scarcely knew how to interpret the meaning of his presence, or whether she were really sorry, or indignant, or glad that he was face to face with her once more. Presently she should settle down to the position, when her heart

beat less fast and the tears had left off swimming in her eyes. She was vexed with herself that she was not stronger after all—that the sight of Paul Essenden had so quickly disturbed her past resolutions to be calm and grave, as befitted her position and was just to herself.

“Mr. Gifford is not well—he has been harassed a great deal lately,” said Augusta, “for he is still busy, very busy, with Mr. Essenden, in endeavouring to obtain an alteration in your sentence. He bade me tell you, Nella, that he does not yet despair of impressing the Secretary of State with the peculiar nature of your case; and though he would have you hope for the best, still he trusts that you are resigned to this great misfortune of your life, in case his efforts should prove unavailing.”

“I am resigned,” answered Nella, “but——”
Augusta Gifford would not allow her to continue.
She went on rapidly—

“And though I would not have you build too much on the result of his intercession—his persistence, like a warm-hearted, stubborn, dear fellow as he is—still, I do not think he would have entrusted me with this message to deliver, without he had great hopes of the result.”

“Do not speak too confidently,” said Paul, in a

low tone ; "it is impossible to say whether there is one hope for her."

"I do not think there is," said Nella, as her hands were lowered at last, and she stood sideways to her friends, with her face averted, and her head bent very low upon her breast. "I would rather think that there is not, please. I have accepted my sentence as a just one, and do not complain ; I was false to the laws, and I suffer for it. Tell me all that you know of my father."

Augusta looked from Nella to Paul quickly, and Paul frowned at her, and shook his head as though in protest against a something which her looks implied. The pause this time was not of a minute's duration, but it appeared at once to surprise Nella, and she swung round her tall lithe form and looked at them at last, her great dark eyes full of eager inquiry. There was no longer any shrinking back in the prisoner, or any shame to face them.

"He's dead—you have come to tell me so!" she cried wildly. "Don't keep me in suspense, but let me know the worst!"

"No, he is not dead, Nella," Paul said hurriedly, and the sound of his voice addressing her for the first time dismayed her for an instant, despite her anxiety concerning her father. "He is abroad,

we think. He has been distressed in mind about you——”

“Poor father!” sighed Nella.

“And has gone abroad, leaving his money, or the greater portion of his money, in Miss Gifford’s hands for you, lest he should never see you again.”

Nella smiled at this.

“Ah, that is his deep concern for me, dear fellow—his nervous fear lest he should die before my time was out, and I should be left unprovided with means as well as friends in the future life beyond this. Always his first thought for his daughter. I wonder what will become of him without me? If I could only know that my prayers are being heard in heaven for that poor penitent, and that in some wise way God gives him patience, and keeps him strong! I—I hope you will see him now and then, Mr. Essenden; he liked you very much, and was always grateful for your generous thoughts of him.”

“I have not seen him,” said Paul slowly.

“Why not?”

“He has gone away, Nella—it is impossible to find him.”

“What makes him hide away from all who knew him at his best? He will find no new friends—he will be wholly alone in the world,” said Nella, with

excitement, "and he will brood on this last disappointment which has separated us until his heart breaks, or his mind gives way, and he knows not right from wrong again. Miss Gifford, you have seen him; he gave you the money with his own hands?"

"Yes, I have seen him."

"How was he looking—what did he say of me? Did he not send me any message?"

"He was excited and almost incoherent, Nella. He could think of nothing but you and your future, and he left with me in notes nearly twenty thousand pounds. It is of the disposal of this sum I wish to speak, Nella," replied Miss Gifford.

"Some other time," said Nella impatiently. "Put it in the bank; give some of it—all of it if you like—to those who want money and are dying for its help. Give it—— No, no; it is his, after all, and we must be careful of it till he returns—I had forgotten that. We will take care of his life's savings, Miss Gifford; he was always a careful man, and may require an account of our stewardship. You have not told me how he was looking?"

"Ill and worn," was the laconic answer.

"He will be here next visiting day—he will be never able to keep away from me," said Nella confidently; "and perhaps, after all, you have fore-

stalled him by coming to the prison so promptly. Unless—unless”—and again the dark eyes dilated with the new suspicion—“there is a something more about him which you know, and which in your false kindness you keep back from me? Yes, there is—there is—I see it in your faces !”

It was the old, impulsive child-Nella who shook the wire screen in her impatience and new fears, and the matron sitting at her post looked up with a grave expression of countenance.

“ You must not go on in that manner, Carr,” was the significant observation, and Nella’s hands dropped to her sides at once, sign of her obedience to the rules, and her duty to the officers of the establishment.

Paul saw the change, and groaned at it.

“ You will tell me what has become of him ? ” Nella said, in tones less excited, but not less anxious.

“ We do not know,” Augusta hastened to add ; “ he has become very strange. We are not his friends any longer, Nella.”

“ Ah, I see,” said Nella, with a sigh, “ my imprisonment has unsettled him very much, and he has not been like himself. He has spoken hastily and offended you, or perhaps your brother, or perhaps you, sir ? ” she added, looking wistfully towards Paul as she spoke.

"Yes, Nella," said Paul gloomily; "he has offended me beyond all hope of pardon."

He called her Nella, thought the prisoner, as though he set her for ever apart from any ill-feeling which might have been engendered between him and her father. It was very kind, but she wished that he had called her Miss Carr—it arose from his pity of her desolateness, but still his pity pained her very much.

"Beyond all hope of pardon," said Nella, quoting Paul's last words. "It must have been a grave offence then, for you used to like him, sir, and seek him out when those of your own station would have been more fitting company. He saved your life, too, and you might have looked over any fault of his in gratitude for that act."

"Pray say no more," urged Augusta.

"Miss Gifford, I plead for him because Mr. Essenden understands him better than the rest of you, and he should remember that my father is a childless old man, unable to reconcile himself to my loss. What is this grave offence that he has committed? I have a right to ask it."

"He——" began Augusta, when Paul checked her, and said hurriedly—

"He shared a secret with you that affected my family and Miss Gifford's, and in betraying it,

Nella, in his mad revenge against the hand that had been raised against you—my poor brother's hand—he brought sorrow and disgrace to all of us."

"The hand raised against me—your brother Horace's?" exclaimed Nella.

"Yes," said Paul.

"Ah, I see all now," said Nella, "and my father turned against him and did not think of the trouble he was bringing on others in his rashness. Poor fellow, I am sure that he is sorry, very sorry now. And so there are no more secrets left, and—you?"

She turned with eagerness to Augusta Gifford, whose mute imploring appeal to desist could not check her questions.

There was some of her father's impetuous nature in Nella, it was certain.

"You and he are parted—it is all broken off, then; and yet I think it was only his miserable vanity which led him on, not his want of love for you. I always thought so—I think so still; and though he may not be worthy of an affection like your own——"

"Hush, Nella, please," cried Augusta, looking towards the matron; "you must not say any more."

"But——"

"But you wound me terribly," said Augusta; and Nella was silent at once.

Miss Gifford would have wholly changed the subject if it had been in her power; she asked Nella a question concerning her prison service, but Nella scarcely replied thereto.

"I am not grieving," she said quickly. "I am glad that you have come to tell me all the news, however sad it may be, or however deeply it affects me. All this will give me less opportunity to think about myself, and more to reflect on what is best for all of you. I shall have so much time to think, you see," she said half apologetically; "and something might strike me, in the long hours I have here, that would be of service to you presently—who can tell?"

Under other circumstances Augusta Gifford could have smiled at this, but the smiling days seemed over for good; and after all, there lay more shadow on her heart than on Nella Carr's.

As she shook her head and turned away to conceal the trembling of her lip from the one whom she had come to console, and whom she had found so terribly curious, Nella found courage to face Paul again.

"Her brother and his wife? Are they together?"

"No, Nella—they are separated."

"I was afraid so," she replied. "I saw from the beginning to the end when you told me all was

known. I saw this from the first, and for the good man's sake as well as hers," pointing to Augusta, "I thought it might be better to keep back the truth. Oh, it never is better, and by my own mistake I have brought about a misery of tenfold bitterness to that from which I would have saved them!"

The matron looked at her watch—the twenty minutes were fast speeding away, and for three months after that day there would come no faces from the outer world to remind the prisoner that the love and interest of those apart from her were still existent, and by such evidence to keep her heart from breaking in the weary years lying between her and liberty.

"They are separated, and you can do nothing?"
Paul shook his head gloomily.

"You could not be his friend either, because you do not understand him. How lonely that man must be, sir!"

"He and I are very busy in your case, Nella; we work together, and the efforts that he makes appear to rob him of his graver thoughts at times."

"Let him keep busy, then," said Nella, with a faint smile, "even in so poor and hopeless a cause as mine. Heaven bless him, and bring its light to him!" she added, looking upwards.

"The twenty minutes are up," said the matron, rising, and addressing the visitors.

"One moment," said Nella quickly. "I don't think the time has quite gone by, Miss Richardson —your watch must be a little fast! Have you told me all now?"

"If there is anything more to tell, Nella, or we may think of presently," added Augusta, "we will write to you."

"There is a something more of trouble. Why," drawing a deep breath of astonishment at her own past short-sightedness, "you are both in mourning!"

"Yes."

"For whom?—not for Mrs. Gifford or—or Mrs. Martin? Please speak!"

"For my brother Horace, who died suddenly," said Paul very quickly again; "who, I believe, was penitent for all the wrong of which he had been the cause, and who told me a few hours before he died that he was sorry for the act which had set you in this awful place. I am glad that he owned that now—though I could not forgive him at the time, Nella."

"You could not?" and then Nella coloured very much, and looked in an affrighted manner towards him, finding with difficulty her voice at last.

"You will see to her, sir," she said, pointing to

Augusta meaningly ; “try and be to her all that a friend should. For the sake of that dead brother in whom she was disappointed—for the sake of her dear self.”

Her voice rang out clear and sharp at the conclusion, and there was a strange earnest expression upon her face, to be read only by Paul Essenden at that time. It haunted him for months afterwards ; he saw it in his sleep, it was before him in his waking dreams, and he read the meaning of it plainly. All that she wished, all the future that she desired to plan now he could guess ; and though he was for ever divided from her—though the shadow of a brother’s death by her father’s hand was deeper than the prison shadows, and no after-light upon his path, he knew, could dissipate it, still he did not accept the position that that eager look indicated for him. He thought that he could never take his brother’s place and make Augusta Gifford his wife ; neither he nor she was regarding the future in that fashion which the convict Nella thought the best for both of them.

“ You will come again some day,” said Nella to Augusta, when the matron had grown impatient, knowing that the rules had to a certain extent been infringed by the delay. “ You, Miss Gifford, will not desert me, I hope ? ”

"I hope to see you very often."

Nella did not ask Paul to come, and though he had not expected that she would, still he felt his heart sink when she turned to him and said—

"Good-bye, Mr. Essenden. Thank you for this visit, which has distressed me somewhat, and yet which I do not regret now. Good-bye, Miss Gifford—heaven bless you both, and bring the better days soon!"

Again the coupling of their names together in that hastily uttered blessing, then the good-bye was echoed by the visitors, and Nella Carr was led back to her cell. On her way she passed a prisoner who held a higher grade than herself in the convict service, having been longer there, and having gained a character for good conduct—a prisoner who could be trusted, and who waited at times in the matrons' mess-room when her services were required—and a sad, faint smile of recognition flickered for an instant on the face of Nella, and was returned by the woman as she and an officer passed her.

This prisoner was Sally, of the Vates Street and Joiner's Lane days; the woman who had first discovered the Carrs down in Deeneford, and in a rash moment, and bewildered by drink, had told the secret to her old friend Mrs. Wisby. So, as Nella

passed from those who had rendered her life a fair one, there flitted across her path upon the lower ground the figure of the woman who had been her worst friend, and yet, in her crime and degradation, as true to her as the dark world about her would allow. Here the light and there the shadow, and before her the narrow, up-hill path which with bowed head she would pursue patiently to wherever it should lead. She thought that it would lead to heaven presently—and sooner, perhaps, than any one was aware—and then all troubles would be at rest, and all those mysteries understood of which she only guessed the meaning now.

She sat down in her cell to consider one mystery before her; for all had not been told her, and there was something more to learn, she knew. She felt that there must be a great, grave reason for Paul Essenden to hate her father so; for Paul was all that was generous, and could have never borne malice in his heart without a cause greater than she could readily conceive. Once the truth flashed on her, and she sprang to her feet, holding her temples and glaring at the white walls of her cell. But it was a truth which she resisted, which she could not accept yet to cast her down completely. Let her believe that there had been a quarrel, and that Paul had taken up the cause of the Giffords, whose utter

misery had been the poor revenge which George Carr's rage had brought about. Let her believe that time would soften down these Giffords' troubles, and in the far-off days—not very far off, either—Paul would see where his true happiness lay, and be a better husband to the one woman whom she reverenced than ever his false and handsome brother would have been. He would take his brother's place at the side of Augusta Gifford, whose heart would naturally turn to him for the sake of the love she once had had for Horace. It was how it should be—it was, she was sure of it, how it would be, now Paul was at home at Deeneford and saw Augusta every day. He had had one wild weak fancy when he thought her an honest farmer's daughter, and that had died away, like the passing folly that it was. He would become like his brother Horace in many respects, and take greater dignity to himself with the new position which he occupied, giving up all those old careless ways which had kept him down, and drawn him, in his fleeting vagabondage, to the lower level where he had met her father and herself. He would forget completely those days—it was so easy to forget at all times!—and marvel at the thoughts which had grown upon him in them.

But, oh! what happy days to look back upon beyond the narrow cell they were to her, and they

would always be ! The false position around her, the knowledge of the early and grim life, could not dim the lustre of those days, for he had loved her in them, and that was a precious recollection, which no present could shadow, and no uncertain future dim. She had never looked forward to becoming his wife, but she had been grateful to him for the love he had showed her, and the light upon that glorious time would, despite all sorrow, burn there like a star.

This love must pass, as by the very law of love, to the handsome and good woman she had seen that day, and she would be glad to think that those two so dear to her would become man and wife. There should not mingle with her joy one vain wish that her life might have justified her in thinking more of him who had been her father's friend.

She thought this, but the head bent forward very much, and they were not happy tears that found their vent at last. For the present, the woman under lock and key was not quite reconciled, for she had not thought out of her heart all the love with which it had been full, and yet which she had so well disguised.

BOOK V.—ATONEMENT.

CHAPTER THE FIRST.

THE GOOD WOMAN OF WILTON.

THREE years and a few months from the date of Nella Carr's committal to gaol for prison-breaking, there set in hard times at Wilton. The winter arrived a few weeks before the hard times; coming somewhat earlier than usual, and bringing sharp black frosts with it, which nipped at the hearts of things and withered them. Then the hard times followed the season's inclemency, by the rule governing hard times in general, and there was much distress in that great county town wherein our story opened. The cold swooped from the heath where Nella's mother died, and dropped like fate upon the poor, cowering in their rags amongst the dens around the market-place; it stopped all work upon the canal—all out-door work, in fact—sent up the

price of bread and coals, and brought distress to thousands. A few well-to-do folk, buttoned to the chin, and with warm blood in their veins, asserted that it was fine bracing weather, but old people grumbled at its continuance, and shoeless women and children shivered before their empty fire-grates, and thought that it was "awful cold." People began to parade the streets shouting forth their wants, and strong fierce men, with hunger in their faces, seemed to multiply and threaten riot; women were found dead on door-steps, and children went to sleep in empty baskets lying about the market-place, and were found in their wicker coffins when the day broke. The landlords grew harder and colder with the frost, too; they wanted their money just as punctually as when the summer rendered payment easy, and work was everywhere; and the broker's man was "down upon them" like a Nemesis, and made havoc with the little place called home.

Charitable people bestirred themselves, but the town was large, rich people were few, and there was an army of empty-bellied ones. Subscription lists ready for signatures lay on bankers' counters and were carried by philanthropists from shop to shop, and house to house; there were collections at the church doors, and letters appealing for help in all the local papers, and still the frost continued, and its

bitter blackness brought death and desolation to the masses.

Amongst those who did their best for Wilton was "the good woman," as she was already called in that place. She had been three or four months in Wilton, having taken possession of a small house in the heart of the town, close to the poor districts, as though she loved the poor, or wished to study them, and would, with her charity, counsel, and kind words, attempt to stem the torrent of adversity. A strange young woman, who perplexed the people; who made no attempt to prove herself better than what she was, but who told all those whom she assisted that she had been very poor and wicked herself, and so knew what poverty and ignorance, without incessant watching, must assuredly become.

They stared at her explanation, those who were as poor and ignorant as she had been, and thought her statement might be reconciled with a weakness of the brain, that took this strange form of hallucination, but was not to be otherwise believed in. For this new-comer was a lady in her way, possessed of much money in her own right, it seemed, and who, though careful in her ministerings, was never parsimonious. She was religious too, talked a great deal of her Bible, and had a bad habit, some of them thought, of reading from it on occasions when they

were not disposed to listen ; but still a good woman, a rare woman ; and the worst of those dependent on her bounty found gratitude enough to say, "God bless her."

A woman with a sad, pale, handsome face, that was in strange contrast to the black dress she wore, and whom only the children of the poor had seen smile now and then ; possibly a woman doing penance, thought the Roman Catholic portion of the population, unable to assign a motive for her constant watch of all who suffered, and that intense eager interest, which was as great in those who struggled and went wrong, as in those stouter souls who struggled and kept right. Amongst the criminal population of Wilton she was well known, and here her story was believed in, for she spoke of facts, and a few remembered them, although the facts were more than three years old, and there had been heavy seas of crime since then beating all round the world, and sinking her case from recollection. She had been a thief, and therefore understood the criminals and their peculiar temptations ; she had been in a reformatory, broken bounds, and been again imprisoned after four years' successful concealment from the law ; she had been expected to die in prison, and the doctor had sent in his report to the directors that as die she must, and

speedily, it would be merciful to let her go ; and the directors, still disturbed by the importunities of a clergyman and a second friend well known in Deeneford, and taking into consideration all the facts of the case from the beginning to the end, had signed the order for her release at last. Here the criminal mind's eye winked significantly, and the sharp ones who knew everything thought that Miss Carr must have "shammed" excellently well to have imposed upon the officials in the big house. For out of prison Nella Carr was well and strong again, though her fatigue was great and incessant in the winter time, and must have broken down women of a weaker constitution long ago. A few believed all that she had told them ; they were as young or younger than she, the majority of this class, and the history of her redemption stirred them to emulation, and to efforts to grope back from their moral darkness to the light beyond it—efforts not always unavailing, thanks to the gentle woman who saw their progress, and whispered words of hope and faith when they were weary by the way.

The outside world began to consider her one of the wonders of Wilton, and opinions were manifold concerning her before the long black frost broke up. The trustful thought that she was doing good ; the poor believed in her, for they experienced her

bounty, and noted her constant and unselfish ministerings ; but the general community, which is ever sceptical to its backbone, and sees no good in anything, exchanged many opinions on this new-comer of whom the town was talking. They were sure that she was striving for popularity ; and, having money to spare, was likely to attain it ; they were convinced that she was vain, and puffed up with self-laudation ; they agreed with others already mentioned that she was a mad-woman, with a method in her madness ; they made a story of atonement out of her, constituted her a kind of Wandering Jewess, bound to do good with her ill-gotten wealth ; and they believed finally in a portion of the truth connected with her past, dismissing the good in it as not worthy of belief, or applicable to common sense, but thinking that the evil in it might be near the mark. Still she held her place, lived down all contumely, and turned not to the right or left, but went on unwavering in her purpose. What people thought of her did not trouble her one instant ; and to praise or censure she turned that calm, almost emotionless face, and stared it back upon itself with a sphinx-like impenetrability. She shunned society, kept herself from those philanthropists who would have enlisted her in their ranks, acted on her own method of alms-giving, and would have none of other folk's advice. Perhaps she was

vain, for when the incumbent of Saint James's Church—a Mr. Marston, whom we have met once in the course of our narrative—called upon her, and condescended to enlighten her as to his ideas concerning the most suitable persons on whom she could dispense her bounty, she replied, after listening patiently, that she was of a different opinion, and knew those who suffered more in Wilton, and needed greater help.

She had one servant to the little house she rented in the most unaristocratic quarter of the town—a strange, hard-featured woman, whom she called Sally, and who was intensely ignorant, and yet intensely fond of her young mistress. There were rumours in circulation that Sally had been a prison-bird too, and that, after obtaining her ticket-of-leave, she had been persuaded to enter Miss Carr's service; and it was Sally herself who had set the story going, resolving not to be more backward in disguising the truth than Nella had been. It was Sally to whom “the good woman of Wilton” pointed as an example to adorn her moral sometimes, and to prove that from this wild, untaught nature, and even after long years of sin, there may come a full regeneration to God's unfortunates. And it was this woman's passionate love for her mistress that helped to keep Nella strong in her endeavours to do all the good

that lay in her power, before the chance of doing good was lost to her.

Nella had been very ill in prison, and could only believe that her health would give way again presently ; it was her impression that the money would outlast her, if she were not quick in distributing it amongst those with whom she mixed. She had almost broken down in prison when the details of that story, with which her father was connected, had been learned by degrees from her constant visitor, Miss Gifford ; and when the news came from America that her father had died there, and had forwarded to Miss Gifford, by one whom he could trust, the remainder of his money, she thought that her one wish was to breathe her last in that prison air in which her strength had been giving way so long. But then came her Majesty's pardon, and liberty, and better health, and again we find her in Wilton, as though she loved the place where the first good thoughts had come, and where her mother was sleeping peacefully after "life's fitful fever." The mother's grave had a tombstone over it now, and Nella went once a week to look at it, and to pray beside it, as a strong man had once prayed there in the moonlight before he gave way, and thought revenge was better than repentance.

Thus in Wilton, apart from all friends of the past

but Sally, and another woman of whom we shall speak presently, lived “the good woman,” as the people called her. It was her title, whether spoken in earnest or in irony ; and though it displeased her, it clung to her and was whispered after her, as people in the streets pointed her out to one another.

To this good woman there came one of the past friends in the second week in January, when the black frost still preyed on Wilton, and there were no signs of milder weather anywhere. He was a tall man, who stooped a little, and whose hair was white ; and when with difficulty he had found his way into Nella’s presence—for she was not easily approachable by gentlefolk, and always shunned them when she could—Nella Carr looked hard at him twice before reconciling him with the name upon the card which had been finally brought in to her.

“Is it Mr. Gifford ?” she said, inclining her head forwards to make quite sure of him—“is it really you, sir ?”

“Yes, of course it is, Miss Carr,” he replied, in a petulant tone, “but your servant is foolish, and hard to impress. She was five minutes arguing with me before I could induce her to take my card in to you.”

“I gave orders this afternoon that I should be busy, and could see no one unless the case was urgent. I expected, in fact, a lady friend to call

upon me. I did not think, dear sir, that you would find me out in this manner."

She held her hands towards him gratefully, and he took them in his own and looked down at her with a strange mournful expression, that it pained her to encounter.

"I am glad I have found you," he said, as he released her hands, "though why you have hidden from us all, I am not able to understand."

"I have scarcely hidden from you, Mr Gifford," she replied. "I told your sister, when I was strong enough to evade her careful watch of me, that it would pain me very much to meet the old faces, and that I was better by myself. She understood that wish, and let me go, not asking my future intentions, and seeing that I was strong enough to act my part alone."

"Why alone?" was the curious inquiry.

"Because I am better alone. I feel stronger, and more able to perform the work that lies before me."

"Then you are sorry to see me, Miss Carr?"

"No, sir," answered Nella, and her face brightened as she spoke, "I am not sorry now. I have been tempted very much to see you all, and to hear your voices again—and to you I have been drawn more than to the rest. Still I have resisted the temptation bravely."

Mr. Gifford sat down in a chair by the fireside, and Nella faced him.

He looked at her nervously, Nella fancied, and the white hand on his knee played a little impatient tune before he spoke again, and she had left off wondering at the change in him, at the dark shadows beneath his eyes, the deep furrows in his face, the whiteness of his hair. She was thinking what a life-long misery he had brought upon himself by setting aside the woman he had had faith in once, when he said suddenly—

“Why have you been drawn to me more than to the rest of them? You never liked me much. I cannot call to recollection now,” passing his hand over his high forehead in a dreamy manner, that was new to him, “one person, save Augusta, who ever liked me much.”

“Perhaps they never told you so,” said Nella quickly; “you cannot tell what hearts are touched by human kindness. And oh, sir, how kind you have been—what efforts, untiring and continuous, you made to set me free! I have heard all from your sister, and though I have thanked you in a feeble letter or two, until to-day I have not seen you to express the gratitude I feel for my salvation. For it *was* salvation,” with a shudder, “to take me from that awful prison!”

"I kept my promise to your father," said Gifford. "I was unsettled, and required occupation for my mind ; you must not attribute my persistence entirely to consideration for you. It would be far from the truth."

It was his old unpleasant habit of setting facts in their worst light, and for a moment or two he looked more like himself.

"I cannot accept that explanation, Mr. Gifford," said Nella warmly ; "for I have lived too long not to know the goodness at your heart."

"You could more justly have thanked Mr. Paul Essenden than me," he continued, "for he strove as hard as I, and with a purer motive. Friends in office, men who had been his brother's friends and were connected with the press—they cried up the poor poems the other Essenden wrote, I think," he added sarcastically, "he enlisted in his service and yours, and in every way he did his best. A hasty, impetuous, eccentric, faulty man, is Paul Essenden ; but I like him very much, for his heart is sound and good. He is only like his brother in the face."

He bit his lips and frowned at the fire, and Nella thought it was strange that he should still nurse the memory of a wrong done by one who had met a greater wrong, and now was not of this world.

"Yes, Paul—Mr. Essenden has been very kind.

I hope he does not consider me ungrateful for my silence, or for merely sending my thanks to him by your good sister ; but I was very anxious to be gone."

" And you confess that you have been drawn more towards me than to the rest of them," he said. " I wish, Miss Carr, that you would explain that."

" I will, if you desire it," said Nella frankly.

She did not take her steady, searching gaze from him ; it embarrassed him, and he felt uncomfortable beneath it. He turned his eyes to the fire, however, and said in his old calm, measured tones—

" I should have scarcely asked you for an explanation had I not desired one."

" Pardon me ; of course, you would not," said Nella. " Well, sir, I have been drawn to you by a sympathy of sorrow, for you have suffered in your way as I have in mine."

" I do not own that," was the impatient exclamation of the minister.

" No, sir, for it is not well to own it, and you are a proud man, who would conceal your troubles from the world. But I have felt sure that in your higher sphere you have been sorrowing for her—that it has not been a happy home without her—and that I might have helped in my way, and by my story, to bring about a reconciliation between you. For it

was I, sir, in my shallow judgment, who caused this separation."

"No, it was her own guilty acts. I am glad that you did not seek me out, for you would have driven me mad by any attempt at defence of her unjustifiable conduct. I—I wish you to understand, Miss Carr, that I never speak of Mrs. Gifford; that it excites me, and renders me unlike myself to hear the mention of her name. You were not aware of this before, and therefore I excuse the liberty you have taken, by intruding upon me a subject which is objectionable."

"I was not aware that you regarded the past so bitterly, Mr. Gifford," said Nella.

"Why were you not?"

"I thought that you were a man who could forgive past injuries."

"There are some injuries that a man never forgives, and this is one of them."

"And yet a woman more truly penitent for all the harm that she has done to herself and those she loved, I have never met."

"Those she loved—ay," he said with a groan, "and the harm remains to remind me, whom she never loved, of the peace that I have lost. Pity me instead of her, Miss Carr, and you will be acting justly, for I am suffering for all the wrongs her

weakness caused, and I deserved not to suffer. I was a faithful husband, a good friend, the best of men," he cried; "and now I belong to no life but my own, and have no interest in any living thing. I am useless; I can neither work nor sit idle; I wander restlessly to and fro, as though I were hunting for the happiness which a bad wife stole away from me! You ask me to forgive that woman—never, Miss Carr, never!"

He rose from his chair, and walked once or twice the length of the room before he resumed his seat. He caught Nella's curious glance again, and said, looking from her, as though it displeased him to be regarded thus attentively—

"I dare say you think that I am very unlike the minister you knew once—so I am; that I am very unforgiving—so I am; and therefore I do not ascend my pulpit now, to teach forgiveness to my fellow-men. That would be hypocrisy. But you must not fancy that I am always like this," he remarked with great earnestness; "on the contrary, there are not many who could detect a difference in me, unless they broached that subject to which you have cruelly alluded. Outwardly, Miss Carr, what difference is there in me after all?"

He thought that he had not changed a great deal, it was evident; he was still proud of his firmness. He

believed that he was bearing his troubles like a brave man, and that they had not left their marks upon him.

"Do you detect any difference in me?" he asked again, as Nella paused. He was very anxious to have that question answered.

"Your hair is white," Nella said at last.

"Yes, but not from trouble," he replied; "it was getting white rapidly when you first came to Wilton, and when I found you sleeping amongst the wheat, Nella."

"And gave me good words, though I regarded them not, and felt they were an offence to me; when you prepared me for the truth concerning that poor mother by whose side you had sat and prayed. Ah, Mr. Gifford, I was at my worst then, and you were at your best!"

"And now we have changed places," he said, almost with a sneer.

"No, I do not say that," answered Nella warmly. "You are ever immeasurably above me, sir, for I have sinned deeply, and your life has been a blameless one. Pray do not fancy that I would offer you one reproach, that I do not always feel for you as for a dear friend whose afflictions have been heavy and undeserved. But you were different then, I think, and would have had greater power to resist the trial had it befallen you at that time."

"How can you possibly know that?" he murmured, and then he thought for awhile, until her hands rested lightly on his shoulder, and he became aware that she was bending over him.

"You must forgive me if I have spoken too earnestly of Mrs. Gifford," Nella said, "but I have been a witness to her new life, and I understand her now so well. She is not a strong woman, but after all she has not been very weak, and she was waking to the truth, and to her duties, when all the troubles came."

"You see her at times?" he said.

"Yes, she works with me in Wilton for the poor. She was the first to find me out and to assist me to a knowledge of the town, and of those who were suffering within it."

"What made you live here?" he asked.

"Because I felt a yearning for the place where I first met you and your sister," she answered; "because I thought that you would not come where Mrs. Gifford was; because I knew that there were many poor and wicked here, and that they must have multiplied since I first met them in the streets; because I was nearer mother, sir."

"Right; and yet at Deeneford——"

"Oh, at Deeneford," said Nella, interrupting him, "I should have been confronted with compassion, or

curiosity, and had to explain much, and say much that is irrelevant to my present life. And then the place would have mocked me with the past happiness I have known in it, when *he* had not given way, but was so good and kind a father."

"I understand," said the rector of Deeneford; "and you can understand too why I shun the village, and am never happy in it. Awfully miserable, and yet drawn back to it for my sister's sake."

"You have not told me what has brought you to Wilton," said Nella. "It was not wholly a wish to find me?"

"No, it was not," he answered. "Chance helped me to discover you, and when my friend Mr. Marston mentioned the name of a Miss Carr as one who was doing good in the town, I came to this house to make sure that it was you. My first object in Wilton—I may say my only one—is the safety of my boy."

"The safety?" repeated Nella.

"I don't feel quite satisfied when he is out of my sight," said Mr. Gifford; "and as he is now on a visit to his mother—for I do not interdict those visits whilst the child falls not off in his respect for me—I have come to Wilton to make sure that no harm befalls him. I like to feel that I am near him. The boy might be taken ill, and then Doctor Rivers could let me know at once."

"He is a fine boy," said Nella, "but somewhat self-willed."

"Have you seen him?—when did you see him?" asked Gifford eagerly.

"Yesterday. His mother brought him to this house."

"It is an unhealthy part of the town, and she must pass that wretched market to come here," said Gifford, his petulance exhibiting itself again. "How indiscreet she is, to be sure! She does not seem to have any thought for the boy at all!"

"I think that she is likely to call to-day, although it is almost past her hour now," said Nella, glancing at the timepiece on her mantelshelf.

"To call here!" said Mr. Gifford, rising to his feet in dismay. "I—I should not like to see her any more, lest she should become excitable in her manner, and unnerve me. For although I am as strong as ever, I do not care to test my strength too much, and she might fancy—poor creature—that I was giving way, and inclined to consider that she had suffered enough for her faults. I would not have another parting with her for the world. Why did you not inform me before, Miss Carr, that you thought she might visit you this afternoon?"

"Because I should not have been sorry to see you two shake hands, at last. You need not bear malice

now, though you may not have one home between you ever again."

"Never again," he answered moodily.

"And yet——"

"Miss Carr, I cannot listen. I know all that you are going to say, but I have made up my mind to my future; I see it all stretching plainly before me to the end."

He did not see beyond that little room; the veil hung over that which was to come and change him very greatly, but he was narrow in his self-conceit, and was sure that he had mapped his life out to that boundary where life ends and eternity begins. He was anxious to be gone; he saw a plot of Nella's to prolong his stay until he was exposed to the embarrassment of meeting his wife, and he shuddered at the thought of such a meeting.

"I have been sadly unlike myself to-day," he repeated, "and you must not consider that this is my usual manner; quite the contrary. Well, Miss Carr, I am glad to have met you, and to have found you well and strong. Some day, I hope, we shall meet again."

"You will tell your sister that I am content, sir, and that I regret nothing."

She thought, like the minister, that she had mapped her life out also.

"I will tell her."

"She is well, I trust? Your little boy was speaking yesterday of his dear aunt Gussy."

"Yes, he is very fond of her—fonder of her than of me almost," he added, with a sigh; "but then he sees more of her. When she is married, I shall have him all to myself; shall travel with him soon, letting him see the world early, and grow strong early in it too, please heaven."

Nella did not hear Mr. Gifford's concluding remarks. Her ears had caught at one or two words in his last sentence, and then had become deaf to everything else.

"Is your sister going to be married, then?" she asked very calmly, although it was strange how her heart fluttered at the question.

"Yes, presently, I think," he said, shuffling with his feet and anxious to be gone.

"To—to—"

"To Mr. Paul Essenden, who is an estimable young fellow, and very unlike the man to whom she was first engaged," said Mr. Gifford, frowning. "He will take his brother's place, and make amends for the misery which fell to her share also. He will be a good husband, I am sure."

"Yes," said Nella in a low voice, "I am sure of that."

She was anxious that her visitor should leave her to herself now ; she wanted to think of this news, and to see in the future the happiness of Paul and Augusta, and yet she wished to say a few more words before he went away for good. He had shaken hands with her, and was close to the door, when she said—

“ You will tell her that I am glad to hear of the coming marriage, Mr. Gifford ; that I see very plainly how suitable it is, and how happy both will be together. It is as it should be, sir, and I will pray for their happiness before my own, for they were both dear to me, and will both think of me now and then. I hope that you will not forget to give them my best wishes.”

“ I have a memory that never betrays me,” he replied, in a manner that implied he was not pleased at her imagining he could forget anything ; and then he paused and turned very white, for a loud summons at the door startled him and suggested who was close upon him.

“ Is it—is it she, do you think ?” he gasped forth, with his presence of mind nearly abandoning him. “ I do not like being trapped in this way, Miss Carr. It is unpleasant in the extreme ! ”

Whilst he was speaking the door opened, and a flaxen-haired boy came, with all a boy’s wild-bull

plunge, into the room, calling out “Miss Carr.” He stopped upon seeing the visitor, looked up, and then, with a cry of recognition, ran at his father’s long legs and clasped them round.

“Mamma, mamma, here’s papa come to see us both!” he cried.

CHAPTER THE SECOND.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

MR. GIFFORD endeavoured to release himself from the grasp of his son, a feat that was too difficult of accomplishment before the advent of his wife, who entered with an anxious, hopeful face after hearing her child's cry.

Yes, little Theo was right; papa was there, though he had not come back for him or her, it was certain by his lowering face. He stood there angry with his boy for thus directing attention to him and calling out to her, and the frown upon his face was like that darkling look of three years since, when he had bidden her quit his house for ever. Like Nella Carr, she stood for a moment amazed at the great change in him, which he would not acknowledge, which he was too blind or obstinate to see. The white hair, the deep furrows which care rather than time had ploughed into his face, the tall form which stooped forward somewhat, and was so great a contrast to the upright, haughty carriage of the man

whom she had married, all dismayed her, and she paused at the open door to mark the change in him, and to feel how much she had been the cause of it. He was not one-and-forty years of age she knew, but he looked close on sixty, then.

"I—I was not aware, Mr. Gifford, that you were here, or that I had been sent for," she said very timidly. "I trust that there is no bad news from home?"

She called it home still, he noted, and his jealous disposition took a new affront at this. What right had she to call it home, he thought, when he had paid her handsomely to sign her name to the contract which kept her far apart from it?

He drew himself up stiffly, and his past agitation and nervousness vanished completely, although only Nella marvelled at the contrast. To the wife he was the same man whom she had seen last, stern and impenetrable—the man who had been wronged, and who showed his want of forgiveness to the wronger in every look and word. Could it have been three years and a few months since they had met last? Only the boy still clinging round his father's knees seemed to render that fact possible.

"There is no bad news, madam," said Mr. Gifford. "I did not expect to find you here when I called upon Miss Carr. You will excuse the liberty that I

have taken in intruding upon you, and allow me to withdraw."

"I am afraid it is I who have intruded," answered Mrs. Gifford, as her husband favoured her with his most formal bow, "but I was not aware that you were in Wilton."

"I am staying with a friend for a few days—I—Well, what is it, Theo?"

He looked down angrily at his boy, who was full of curiosity, and anxious to attract his father's notice.

"Why don't you kiss mamma, and ask her to come back with us? Is she too ill still to live in Deeneford, pa?"

"Yes, my dear, much too ill," said the mother quickly. "Don't harass your papa with questions. Don't you see that he is very anxious to be gone?"

"Yes—but how is it—"

"Theo," checked Mr. Gifford in a peremptory voice, that silenced the child at once, "I will not be addressed in this manner—you should know better, sir! There, there, I did not mean to make you cry," he said, suddenly stooping to caress him; "some day you will understand this better, boy, and pity me."

"And pity both of us," added Laura Gifford.

"I do not see that," he began, looking over the child's head at his wife; and then he paused and said, "Well, well, it will be right for him to do so;

he may pity you more than me when he grows to be a man, perhaps—that will be his gratitude.”

And with this crude remark, he put the boy at arm’s length off him and went out of the house and into the street. Mrs. Gifford took the seat that he had quitted, and shed a few tears, that rendered the firelight very misty for awhile. Nella’s voice aroused her from her reverie.

“ He is very strange,” she said, “ very unlike the Mr. Gifford whom I have ever known.”

“ I see no difference in him,” replied Laura, with a sigh.

“ Excitable—easily moved ; it is as if the parting between you had affected his mind a little—he looks and talks so strangely.”

“ He is the stern man that my follies have made of him. I detect no change, Nella. I did hope once that when Augusta had told him all, and the opportunity had come for him to hear all patiently, he would have changed his estimation of me.”

“ I think that he is altering now,” said Nella ; “ this new, unsettled mood may augur much good for you.”

“ Ah, you do not know Theobald Gifford so well as I !” replied Laura, shaking her head. “ It was this unforgiveness of which I have always been afraid, which led me from the first to fear his

anger. But I am not thinking of sharing his home, or lightening his sorrows. He was right when he said life with him, and with his suspicions, would be worse than isolation. I have shaped my own ends, and I dare not complain. There, I will not think of him any more. Poor fellow! what a careworn face his was. What are you listening for, Theo? Why don't you look at that pretty book upon the table?"

"Are you speaking of papa?" he asked.

"Why, how can I be speaking of your papa?" she said; "he is very happy down in Deeneford, is he not?"

"Yes, I think so, mamma, for he never told me that he wasn't."

The boy went away to the picture-book which his mother had recommended him to study, and Laura Gifford sank her voice into a whisper.

"We will talk about our poor another time," she said; "to-day, for a little while, I think that I should like to talk of him. Tell me all that he said of me. Did you mention my name to him?"

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"That he was restless, and could not pursue his vocation; that he was very miserable, and no one pitied him."

“As if I did not! Why will he not believe in my penitence, I wonder?”

“He may believe in it—I think he does.”

“I hope you spoke up for me a little, Nella; for you have been my one friend lately, though I have been never kind to you.”

“Are you not ashamed to call me friend, Mrs. Gifford—you who come from a proud family?”

“I am proud of your friendship, Nella; it has raised me to a higher train of thought, and in some strange way it has rendered me less despairing of the future. I have been hoping that I should meet him once more, and regain his confidence, but this day seems to have dashed down every hope I had.”

“Patience, Mrs. Gifford. I have a hope myself that he is changing—that he and you will forget the past, and know each other better. For he is not happy without you, and he misses you still.”

“If I could reckon upon his forgiveness, I would be content. If I could be only sure that he would believe my story, every word of it, I would not care to go back to his home. For after all,” and here her head bowed very low as she spoke, “I was not a good wife to him, and I am answerable for all the darkness of these latter days.”

“Not for all. You take upon yourself too much.”

"I am not sure of any one's forgiveness—not even sure of yours, Nella Carr—you who suffered with the rest of them."

"I have not to forgive you, madam. If it were hard and cruel to break up a home, and thrust me into prison, at least he who warred against me was sorry too before he died."

"Who told you that?"

"His brother Paul, who came to see me once."

"Indeed! I—I thought you knew all, and that you forgave all, Nella, when I met you first in Wilton. But you are in the dark still; and poor, weak Horace took all the blame for my sake, then. I did not think that even in his grave I had forgiven him for the misery that he had brought upon me; but I do now, I am sure."

"Was it not he who wrote to the police, then?"

"No, Nella; it was I who learned the secret from him, and then, distrustful of my safety in your hands, and fearing, from your past character, that you would prove a treacherous confidante, I betrayed you in my selfishness. Ah, I thought that there was no forgiveness for that," she cried, as Nella shrank away from her.

"Yes, there is. It is all past," said Nella, holding forth her hand, "and you have suffered for the act far more terribly than I have. If my poor

father had only known this, what might have been spared us all. Let us forget this miserable past, Mrs. Gifford, and look not behind us ever again. There is work for both in the future, and retrospection will not bring us peace."

"Yes, you are the 'good woman,' Nella."

"Oh, don't say that," answered Nella Carr, "for I am very weak, and I envy others' happiness and others' chances in life. I try not, but I do."

Was she thinking of Augusta Gifford in that moment, as she sat there in the firelight, clasping the hand of the woman who had betrayed her, and yet who seemed, by a common suffering, to have become her friend? Or of Paul Essenden, who never came to see her now—she forgot, in that moment, that it was only Mr. Gifford who had discovered her—and who was going to marry the best and purest-minded woman whom she had met in life, and who deserved some happiness on earth as well as in heaven? Yes, she must have been thinking of them both, for she said suddenly—

"I did not tell you that Mr. Gifford says they are going to be married."

"They—who?"

"Miss Gifford and Mr. Essenden."

"Indeed! Are you sorry?"

"Why should I be sorry?" cried Nella sharply.

"Yes. Why should you?" was the answer.

And then, after a quick glance into Nella's face, she fell once more into a reverie, from which her companion made no effort to arouse her. Meanwhile the boy, sitting at the table and poring over the pictures in the book, hummed blithely to himself, and forgot his father, mother, and friend in the fairy world before his eyes. So youth smiles on, and recks not how our poor humanity suffers. Presently his turn upon the stage of life, and we are set quietly aside, and all our petty troubles buried with us.

CHAPTER THE THIRD.

MR. GIFFORD THINKS OF HIS SISTER.

MR. GIFFORD went back to Deeneford before the week was out, or the frost had gone, and waited there as patiently as his nature would allow for the return of that son whom he had entrusted to the mother. The boy had been allowed to spend three weeks with his mother on the present occasion, and Mr. Gifford counted jealously the days, and sent his groom at last all the long journey to Wilton for him, with strict injunctions to accept no excuses, but to bring little Theo back with him on the day and hour agreed upon.

Mr. Gifford was still living at the rectory, was still ostensibly rector of Deeneford, although Mr. Small did all the preaching and praying on Sundays. The villagers had settled down to this abnormal state of things—it had gone on for years now, and they did not miss Mr. Gifford from the pulpit much. They seemed to have become of the rector's opinion, that he could preach no more, that

his part was played out in Deeneford, and that his separation from his wife had been a crushing blow, from which he was not likely to recover.

When he was in Deeneford, he was as energetic as ever in his parish work. He did not neglect visiting his flock and offering all the consolation that it was in his power to bestow; he was always scheming to promote the comfort of the villagers, and to advance their children's education; he was fond of attending the infant schools, and of watching the little ones at their various tasks; his purse was ready to open—more ready than it had been in old times—to any one's appeal for assistance, and though he officiated not in Deeneford Church, he took his place there on Sunday by his sister's side, and offered an example to his congregation.

This when he was in Deeneford, from which he escaped very often, as if it were uncongenial to him, and yet which he could not wholly give up, as though there were associations that endeared him to the spot where he had spent some fleeting months of happiness before the truth dismayed him. He would go away for three months at a time without giving notice of his departure, and Augusta, sorrowing for him and his eccentricities, would suddenly receive a letter from him, informing her that he was in a quiet foreign village, trying if change of

air and scene would do him any good. For he did not always maintain to her that he was the same Theobald Gifford whom she had always known; there came occasionally weak moments when he would confess that he was not like himself, that he could not settle down to one study or one life, but must in action try and forget how desolate he was.

Augusta Gifford grew anxious concerning her brother as the time went on and brought no resignation. She believed that the resignation would not come until he and his wife were friends, and she did not see her way to beat down all that stubborn opposition which appeared to prefer his misery to saying "I forgive her." She found that, with all her life-long knowledge of him, she had scarcely estimated Theo's character correctly; she could have imagined him stern and exacting, terribly resentful of a wrong against his pride, and never looking upon those who had wronged him with the same feelings as of old; but she was not prepared for his giving way silently to the shock, and for his brooding upon results to the neglect of his duties and his interests as he had done since his wife's departure. He must have loved Laura very strangely, she thought—made of her an idol in his heart, which had been so bound

up with her that it gave way at the same time as his trust in her.

Augusta had many conferences with Paul Essenden concerning him. Paul was her adviser in all matters that distressed her, and he was often at the rectory. Time seemed to have changed him a great deal also, and to have sobered him with the rest of them. They were all grave-faced, thoughtful, earnest folk in Deeneford and elsewhere then; there had been a tragedy enacted in that village, beginning with the arrest of a farmer's daughter for prison-breaking, and ending in a murder. It was no wonder that the clouds which had hung over them three years ago, still seemed to cast their shadows upon those who had suffered. The murderer had died abroad, it was rumoured, after sending money to his daughter; but there were people who hardly believed the tale, and who said in Deeneford that George Carr was living, and would be yet discovered. They whispered also that all was not true that Paul Essenden had stated concerning the quarrel with his brother, that Augusta Gifford knew more than she cared to acknowledge of her lover's murder, and that Mrs. Gifford had confessed something to her husband which had altered him for life, and set him for ever apart from her. It was not certain that the principal folk at

Deeneford were more esteemed for the mystery about them in these later times. They tried to live down these rumours, but they were not happy in the place. Augusta would have been glad to quit the village, but the rector would not resign his living ; he should preach again presently, he asserted. Mrs. Martin had been born on her estates, and loved the old place wherein her life had been spent, despite the tragedy that had occurred there. Paul Essenden did not use any strong arguments to induce his aunt to retire from a spot where people spoke too much concerning them ; he had never loved Deeneford, but, after all, it might be as well to grow used to it. He had set himself the task of studying aunt Martin, of keeping back the scandal from her, of letting his dead brother remain for ever in her memory as the clever, high-principled, affectionate nephew that he had ever seemed to her, and of doing all in his power to render his aunt's loss less acute, by imitating Horace's old ways, and dropping all those objectionable habits of his own, which had rendered him for so long a doubtful character in her estimation.

He succeeded in winning the affection of the old lady, of becoming a second son to her ; and no one looking into his serious face, or watching him at the Hall, could have guessed the restless nature which still existed in him, and yet which he

disguised so well. He had set himself a giant's task, but he had had the strength to perform it, and it had now grown more easy to him.

He and his aunt were at the rectory the day of little Theo's return ; Paul had taken a new interest in Gifford since the man's troubles had shown themselves so plainly, and Augusta was always glad to welcome him, and to use her efforts with his own to render the minister a companionable and rational being. And it was strange that Paul had begun to exercise a certain amount of influence over Mr. Gifford—a power of drawing him from his study, wherein he was fond of ensconcing himself when at home, and luring him to the drawing-room for an hour or two's conversation before Paul went back to the Hall.

The Reverend Theobald Gifford had been loth to quit his study on the occasion to which we have alluded ; but Paul, leaving his aunt with Miss Gifford, had marched up-stairs, and surprised the clergyman sitting with his boy upon his knee, and subjecting him, it was evident, to a rigorous cross-examination as to all that his mother had said to him since he had been at Wilton. The questions ceased as Paul walked unceremoniously into the room, and Mr. Gifford's frown deepened a little at the intrusion.

"I did not know that you were here," said Gifford, as the boy scrambled off his father's knees and ran to Paul, who was a favourite with the child.

"Yes, my aunt and I have come to dine with you • Why, we have not seen anything of you, Gifford, since your return."

"I have been very busy," said the rector—"very busy indeed."

"You have been to Wilton?"

"Well—yes," he answered, in a hesitating manner, "I have been there. I called upon Miss Carr."

"Miss Carr—in Wilton," exclaimed Paul, "and well, I hope? How was she looking, Gifford? Has she recovered from her illness? Is she interested still in any of us?"

"She is looking well—she has not lost her interest in her friends, I am sure. A worthy young woman, whom misfortune, prison servitude, slander, have strengthened in mind and rightful purpose wonderfully. There are some women in the world who rise to heaven in the face of every danger, as there are some who fall at the least temptation which steals across their path."

He was thinking of his wife, but Paul took no heed of this in his impatience.

"Yes, exactly—everybody knows that," he said;

"but Nella always was different from any one else. Poor girl, what a life hers has been!"

"Did you like Nella Carr, sir?" asked the boy, turning round to look Paul in the face.

"Yes," was the slow answer.

"I thought everybody must like her," said little Theo. "She likes you, I know."

Paul gave a perceptible start at this, and pulled at his long brown moustache for a moment or two, before he said—

"What makes you think so?"

"Oh, she asked me so many questions about you yesterday, when I went to bid her good-bye."

Paul did not ask him what those questions were, but he resolved, at a later period of the day, to get that intelligent boy into a quiet corner, and cross-examine him rigorously.

"Did she?" he said. "Well, that was kind of her. And you and she are great friends, I suppose?"

"Yes, indeed we are. But I want to know why you don't go and see her, sir, or why she don't come here to see you."

"Because I'm not her friend, Theo," answered Paul.

"And is not papa mamma's friend, that she keeps away too?"

"Theo, go up-stairs," said the father sharply; and the boy, scared by the tones that greeted him, slid off Paul's knees and went towards the door.

"And come down directly after dinner, young fellow, and see what Mrs. Martin has brought you—don't forget," called out Paul.

"Oh, I won't forget," said the child; and he went up-stairs to worry his nurse as to the exact time that "directly after dinner" meant. As the door closed, Mr. Gifford gave an emphatic stamp with his foot.

"That boy is too precocious for his age—I object to it. He is always full of questions when he comes from Wilton."

"Yes, that's natural. And so Miss Carr is in Wilton?"

"Yes, spending her father's money in assisting the poor around her—doing all she can to check the poverty and crime in the town, and proceeding with an earnestness that is worthy of her better life. And yet that pious, self-denying woman had no education till she was almost a woman, and has recently been a pri——"

"I know all that," interrupted Paul peevishly. "Hers is a nature that soars upwards—always the best of women, and yet without a friend in the world."

"I am her friend—so is Augusta."

"Why do you leave her alone, then?" asked Paul sharply. "You have discovered her; she is not a strong woman; she will work herself to death in the hopeless cause which she has taken up; she is an enthusiast and a visionary."

"If she would only come here and see after Theo," said the rector; "if—— What made you say, Paul, that you were not her friend?"

"Can I be the friend, the true friend, of a girl who clings to her father still? who has forgiven in her heart—I am sure she has—the murderer of my brother?"

"Perhaps not," said Gifford, after considering the question for a moment or two.

"And yet it is not that which seems to keep me apart from her. I told you how I loved her once, Gifford; there is no secret about it; your sister knows it also, I suppose?"

"Well, go on," said Gifford.

"All this is a subject on which I do not care to dwell, which is to me a sacred one," said Paul; "but I feel that I am doomed to bring that girl's hate on my head, to make her regard me as a monster void of all sympathy with her, and with all those troubles that she has borne so bravely. I shall meet her father presently, and on him I can

have no mercy. He killed my brother, and brought misery to all of us ; he swept him from life when Horace might have lived to have stepped back to his old dear self, and linked all our love with his again ; oh, Gifford, he was so good a fellow once ! ”

The man’s love for his brother must have been very deep to have thus suddenly unmanned him ; it was the secret of his long gloom, his present life, his new character.

“ George Carr is dead,” said the rector.

“ I do not believe it. That is one of his cunning shifts to end the story so far as the law is concerned, but I feel that I shall be the means of bringing him to justice. Whilst that wretch is free, they talk in Deeneford, Kliston, everywhere, of my hate for Horace, who was the usurper of my rights, and they whisper that I struck him down to get his place.”

“ Nella wears deep mourning for Carr. Do you think she would deceive us in this manner ? ”

“ He is dead to her for the present,” said Paul, “ but he bides his time to creep forth from his lair, and then I shall have him by the throat.”

“ It will be a poor revenge,” said Gifford ; “ the man was your friend once, and he was not sane, he owned it to Augusta, when he struck the blow.

Your brother had acted as cruelly to him as to the rest of us, and——”

“Mr. Gifford, you and I cannot agree on this topic, I am aware. After all, I knew my brother better than the rest of you did, and therefore his memory I respect more: over my brother's faults is his gravestone.”

“I will say no more. But——”

“Shall we go down-stairs?”

“If you wish it. You are excited, Paul; they will think we have been quarrelling, and torment us with a hundred questions.

“I shall be composed before we get to the drawing-room door. Like yourself, I have lost a great deal of my indifference to passing things, and a straw in the air affects me.”

“It is very strange.”

“Strange that I could die for a girl whose father I wish to hang,” he said, shrugging his shoulders; “well, that is likely to unsettle a man a little.”

“A good girl, but not one to die of love for,” replied Mr. Gifford coolly. “A gentleman could never marry her with all those grim antecedents to lower him as well as herself. You will marry a lady, and there is a happy time for you at least.”

“I do not see it ahead of me; and it's a long time coming,” said Paul drily.

"Augusta is looking pale, I think," said Mr. Gifford, as they descended the stairs.

Paul seemed embarrassed at this mention of Augusta's name, following closely upon the previous remark of the minister's, but he answered that he thought that she was looking very well.

The rector did not appear to consider that he had given rise to any suspicions in Paul Essenden's mind, but talked of Augusta all the way to the drawing-room, and of her kindness and forethought towards himself since he had not been well enough to preach in Wilton Church.

In the drawing-room, afterwards in the dining-room, and finally in the drawing-room again, Theobald Gifford was the well-bred host that night, although Paul, disturbed by the thoughts which he had allowed to rise to the surface in Mr. Gifford's presence, was less like himself than usual. Later in the evening Augusta went to the piano, and Paul, setting aside Master Gifford, whom he had had upon his knees and talked to a great deal, crossed to her side to watch her playing, and to turn over the leaves of her music.

Mr. Gifford and Mrs. Martin regarded them attentively, and once exchanged a significant glance, which led the former to say in a low tone—

"I think that they understand each other."

"I should be very glad to see it," said Mrs. Martin, in the same subdued key; "it seems the only thing worth living for."

"It is so natural to love Augusta," said Mr. Gifford, proceeding with this dangerous topic, "that he will be drawn to her insensibly, and forget the past passion which he entertained for Nella Carr."

"I hope so. But he says nothing, and I have not the courage to speak to him. He is not so outspoken, so eager to make me his confidante as my poor Horace was."

Mr. Gifford did not reply to this. A hasty answer had risen to his lips, which he compressed for a moment, as though unable to trust himself to speak.

"And to think that this is your wish also, Mr. Gifford!"

"Yes—for I am not a fit companion for her. She has been too long a slave to me, and I should like—very much like—to see her happy before I go away; to be assured, Mrs. Martin, that I leave her in good hands."

"Do you think of going away, then?"

"Presently."

Mrs. Martin was nearly asking if Mrs. Gifford would accompany him, but she checked herself, knowing that there was a mystery about the wife which no one had attempted to explain to her. She

knew that they were separated by mutual consent—"for a time," Augusta had once said to her—but she was not aware that that separation had begun on the day after Horace's death, and she had never coupled it with her own affliction. Her faith had been too great in Horace to think anything wrong of him, although he had confessed one day that he had never loved Augusta Gifford. That was in one of his morbid fits, when he scarcely knew what he was talking about, she thought—when he had confounded himself, possibly, with one of the heroes of his poems.

Mrs. Martin and Mr. Gifford did not indulge in further conversation; the boy stole to his father's side, and seemed to be watching with them, and Paul stood looking down upon the fair face of her who had loved his brother once. Perhaps he was thinking how unworthy his brother had been of her, or how strange it was that she, ever so shrewd and earnest a woman, should have formed so high an estimate of Horace's character, and never known until too late—if she had ever known—how false he was to her. Paul was regarding her very thoughtfully, and it might have crossed his mind that there at his side lay one fair chance of happiness if he could forget the wild first love which had come late in life to him, and from which

he had not yet recovered. He knew what his aunt desired well enough, though he had not appeared to pay attention to her hints, and he had been surprised more than once by the rector's remarks concerning Augusta and himself. He was not a vain man, or he might have fancied that Augusta's face had brightened at the sight of him lately, and that his attention to her, for his brother's sake—for her own sake, who had been cruelly disappointed, and might have been his sister—had more deeply impressed her than he had intended.

But he was not a vain man, and the thought had not entered his mind. He was naturally a kind-hearted fellow, and to this fair young woman of six-and-twenty he considered that he might turn for companionship, without all the gossips of the village prating of them both. He felt that she was a sensible girl, who would understand him exactly, and he was drawn to her by the knowledge that she was the only one, except his aunt, who could talk to him of Horace. She had known Nella, too, and could relate to him much of her past life; and though he had never spoken to her of his love for Nella, he was sure that she knew his story from her brother, and comprehended the reasons for his silence.

In a quiet, peaceful fashion the evening wore away, until Mrs. Martin's carriage was announced

to be waiting in the frost without, and then aunt and nephew went homewards. Presently brother and sister were seated before the fire, and Mr. Gifford said suddenly—

“It has been a pleasant evening, Augusta.”

“I am glad you think so,” she answered. “I was afraid at one time that you would not join us.”

He did not express any surprise at this remark, but said—

“Do you not think that it has been a pleasant evening yourself, Gus?”

He spoke in so gentle a manner to her that she looked up quickly.

“Yes,” she replied, astonished at his mood.

“Perhaps the pleasant evenings are stealing back again, and the gloom that has been round us is lessening somewhat. We are not made to mourn all our lives for one calamity.”

“If they should come back—if you and Laura——”

“I am not speaking or thinking of Laura,” he interrupted, in a tone very different from that which he had been using, “but of Paul Essenden and you.”

Augusta coloured, but looked hard at the fire and away from him. He had coupled their names to-

gether more than once before, but never with that significance.

"He seems drawn to you. He is worth twenty of the man whose memory you have no right to cherish as that of one who was faithful to you. And, Gus, if he ever asks you to have him, tell me what you'll say?"

He bent forward with eagerness to peer into her face, which was still burning, unless the glow of the firelight deceived him.

"You cross-examine me too closely, Theo," she said, looking at him at last, and laughing pleasantly, as in the old days before the troubles came. "I can assure you that Paul Essenden has not a thought of me."

"I am sure that you are mistaken."

"Sure?"

"Well, almost sure," answered Theobald Gifford, "for he comes very often, and it is not to see me. I never liked his brother," he added with a scowl, "but this man wins upon me, and I wish to see him happy. For what a home you could make such a man, Gus."

"Have you turned match-maker late in life? Have you ever thought, my dreamy Theo, what is to become of you without me?"

"I think till my brain swims, very often, of what is to become of you without me, Gus, for I am going

to travel—going a long way abroad on a foreign mission, and I shall take the boy with me and leave you alone."

"Is this true?" asked Augusta, in her bewilderment.

"Certainly it is," he replied, drawing himself up in his old rigid manner when anything displeased him. "Why should I tell you an untruth? Have I ever told you an untruth in my life?"

He had told Nella Carr only yesterday that Augusta and Paul Essenden were going to be married, but he did not seem to recollect it, unless he was sure of the end as he desired it, and knew all that was working in his favour better than Paul or Augusta knew themselves. Being sure of this future match, he had told the truth to Nella Carr, though it was not like Mr. Gifford to speak thus prematurely. But then, it was palpable to others that he was not always like himself now.

"Going abroad—when, Theo?"

"When I have obtained the appointment, of course—it is promised to me; and in the new land, surrounded by new people altogether, I feel that I can work. My friend Warwick—you have heard me speak of Warwick, whom I interested in Nella Carr's case—is to obtain it for me."

"Cannot I accompany you?"

"I hope that you will not, for you are learning to love Paul Essenden."

"My dear Theo, I wish you would not think of this."

"If I could only leave you happy," he sighed forth; "if I could be only sure of you. You have not told me what you would reply to him if he were to ask you to become his wife?"

"I might ask for time to consider if I could make him a good wife, Theo," said Augusta slowly; "I would beg him to remember that my second love would be always something calmer and less romantic than my first, even if I were to accept him for a suitor. This in all confidence between us, Theo, as you press me hard."

"In all confidence."

"It is a foolish speculation to grow eloquent upon, Theo, but I have been frank with you."

"You speak as if you thought of his brother as the first one in your heart; as if he held a place there still, though he has been dead years, though in all his life—the coward owned it—he never loved you," said Mr. Gifford, rising and tossing his arms to and fro passionately for an instant. "I cannot understand an affection like it; it is morbid and unreal, and you insult my common sense by keeping true to such a fantasy."

"I should have never married Horace had he lived, Theo," replied Augusta, "but I look back upon him kindly; and at least I loved the man."

"I would not own it; you should have more pride," he cried.

He went out of the room, slamming the door behind him, and Augusta sat before the fire and shed a few tears over brother Theo, who had grown so excitable and strange. She would be glad, she thought, when that appointment came of which he had spoken. It would keep his mind directed to one object, and render him less full of odd fancies concerning her and Paul Essenden; she would be glad to go with him abroad and study his new life; unless—and then she checked her ideas midway, and tried to turn them aside by that great effort which never answers, and only fixes the thought more indelibly on the mind of the thinker. Unless Paul Essenden was really learning to love her; unless it lay in her power some day to make the brother of her first love happy by her marriage with him. Were those the thoughts which Augusta Gifford vainly strove to check, we wonder?

CHAPTER THE FOURTH.

RESTLESS MINDS.

MEANWHILE, brother Theo had gone to his room, flung up the window with a hand that still shook with the anger that was in him, and planted himself on a chair to gaze at the star-lit landscape beyond. It was very cold for star-gazing—the frost was as sharp in Deeneford as at Wilton; but Mr. Gifford was not impressed by it. He sat there chewing the cud of that discontent which Augusta's last words had brought to him, and staring straight ahead of him with a gloomy frown at the night.

How long he sat there, he never knew. It must have been till a late hour, for he had answered “good-night” to Augusta as she passed, a long while since—answered in a sullen tone too, like a man offended with her still for her unreal sentiment concerning Horace Essenden; and when he looked round again he found that his candle had burnt out in the candlestick, and that he was sitting in the

dark. He hesitated for an instant, and shivered with cold for the first time; he endeavoured to ascertain the hour of the night, or early day, by the light of the stars upon his watch; and failing in the effort, he finally raised his hand to the window to close it, pausing suddenly to peer down into his garden with an eager intentness. There was a something below which attracted him—a something that moved across the lawn, and came closer to the window as he gazed, turning up a white face towards him as it advanced.

“Who’s there?” said Gifford’s deep voice at last.

“A friend,” was the answer.

“No friend to me can be lurking in my grounds to-night. What is your name?”

“Hush, sir—not so loud,” said the excited voice below. “I am George Carr. I must see you for an instant.”

“George Carr!” exclaimed the rector in his amazement—“at this hour. What mischief do you intend by lurking here?”

“No mischief,” said Carr. “Come down, if you have any charity left in you. The rector of Deeneford may trust himself with me—I bear *him* no malice.”

Theobald Gifford hesitated for an instant, and then closed the window. He would descend and hear

what this man, risen as from the dead, had to say to him ; he might wish a message to be delivered to his daughter, and Mr. Gifford could not refuse him that.

He walked out of his room and down the stairs in the darkness, knowing perfectly his way. He took his hat, coat, and stick from the hall, and thus equipped and on defence, he walked cautiously along a passage leading to the garden, opened the door at its extremity, and passed out.

George Carr was standing where he had left him, an old-looking man, who had allowed his beard and moustache to grow, and a grey wilderness they doubtless were in the daylight.

"I had hoped, Carr, never to see you again," said the rector.

"And so never to be tempted to betray me, shall I say?" added Carr ; "hoped that I was dead in earnest, perhaps, for you ministers are not always charitable."

"Have you come to taunt me, Carr ? surely your visit has a better motive?"

"Yes, it has," said Carr ; "forgive me, but there is more of the wild beast in me since I have been hunted up and down the world again. I thought to have kept in America, but the old spell—the old infatuation of the criminal—draws me to the place

where I am most likely to be discovered. I could not stop away any longer."

"What do you want?"

"To see her, if she is in your house. I know that she has been released from prison, for I dared all, went to the London gaol yesterday, and told them that I was a relation and desired an interview. She is with you?"

"No."

"Not here?" exclaimed Carr as they walked on together into the denser shadow beneath the trees, where the rector seemed to have forgotten all his fear of him; "where is she then?"

"In Wilton."

"Living alone—without friends—with all you people drawing back from her, because she has been in prison for a crime committed in her girlhood, and it wounds your pride to be associated with her now? Don't tell me that, for I cannot bear it."

"There is no necessity to excite yourself thus," said Mr. Gifford. "You are hasty in your conclusions, and do us all an injustice. She has preferred that life to the one with us which has been offered her; but I have a hope that she may be induced presently to return here. I saw her a week or two ago."

"In Wilton?"

“Yes.”

“How was she looking?”

“Well and strong again.”

“Believing in my death?”

“Yes, believing in your death.”

“I must see her once more, if it is only in her sleep, Mr. Gifford,” he said firmly.

“It is not wise of you.”

“If it is only at a distance—from the window of a house which she may pass, and where I can say after her, God bless her; but see her I will.”

“Well, it is not for me to ask you to reflect again upon this rash resolve.”

“No, it is no business of yours,” said Carr roughly.

“Where is she staying at Wilton?”

The rector gave the address of Nella very reluctantly, and the man wrote it down in the darkness with a pencil on the corner of a newspaper which he drew from his pocket.

“Thank you,” said Carr, in a tone more deferential. “I will go now, and judge for myself whether she is contented with the solitary life she has chosen. If not, great Heaven, what shall I do, sir?”

“Ask me not to advise you,” answered Gifford; “you will remember that a false step may do much harm to her.”

“Yes, she had better think me dead,” groaned

forth Carr ; “but I have a difficulty in collecting my best thoughts now. I am awfully unsettled. Sometimes I think that I must be going mad, and that I shall strike all the world—the cold, hard world—with my madness presently. You cannot understand such thoughts.”

“Yes, I can, Carr, for I am going mad myself,” he said, in a low whisper.

Carr gave a low, short laugh at this, and Mr. Gifford said, in an offended tone, that sounded strangely enough at that hour—

“You are not asked to believe in any troubles save your own, or to feel sympathy for them.”

“How did she get out before her time?” asked Carr, not heeding this remark ; “by your efforts?”

“Partly by mine, partly by Mr. Essenden’s, partly on account of her own ill-health.”

“Thank you for your share—thank him also, a week hence, when he cannot lay his hands upon me. For, Mr. Gifford, it is of that man whom I am most afraid.”

Gifford recollect ed Paul’s words uttered in his study a few hours ago, but did not quote them to add still further to his companion’s superstition.

“Paul Essenden would have no mercy on me—I am sure of it,” said Carr. “A good fellow, but terribly just in some things. I remember him in

the bush when we were friends, and how he used to tell me of his brother, until I loved his brother for his sake, and thought what a good man he must be. And that Paul Essenden is as restless as you or I, and walks the lanes at night as if he knew by instinct that I should cross his path. He is abroad to-night—he was smoking and walking up and down from the Upland Farm to the Hall, when I shuffled by him like the tramp that it was not difficult to imitate."

"Paul Essenden still awake and watchful," said the rector, "then you had better not remain. He may have followed you."

"No; I watched him cautiously before I came on, and I saw him turn into the garden of his own house, and knock the ashes of his pipe out against the window-sill, as though his watch were over for the night."

"Still go, Carr; and trust me to keep the secret of your presence here."

"I trust you." Carr turned suddenly away from Mr. Gifford, and walked across the lawn to the gravel path, round by the path to the front of the house, and then into the high road again. He walked away from the Hall in the direction of the Upland Farm, which had once been his, and where the vision had so swiftly faded from him, and went

out of his way to proceed along the road that led to the very gates of his former home. Here he folded his arms upon the fence, and looked towards the farm, standing black and lifeless against the blacker sky. There were no lights burning in the farmhouse windows, and all was very still around. The leafless trees shot up their branches to the skies, like a myriad arms raised in forgiveness for the man, and there was only a faint soughing of the cold wind abroad, as of the moaning of some poor wretch in pain.

George Carr stood thinking very deeply—recalling all that had happened in his vain ambition of settling down to peace. Was he penitent at last for all the evil that he had caused in his craving for revenge on those who had brought about his daughter's misery? It seemed so, for he muttered—

“Heaven have mercy on us all, and let our trials on earth atone for much committed on it.”

He leaped backwards as a voice thundered in his ears—but it was too late, for a hand had grasped him by the throat, and it was a stronger hand than his now, and not to be escaped from.

“Heaven have mercy on you, George Carr!” said the stern voice of Paul Essenden, “for your days are numbered now!”

CHAPTER THE FIFTH.

THE OLD FRIENDS.

GEORGE CARR staggered against the fence of the Upland Farm, and then with an effort recovered his composure. The impulse to resist, even against a stronger man than himself—that impulse which had swayed him through life, and had been ever necessary for his liberty—was checked, and with the hand of his captor at his throat, he looked into his old friend's face.

For an instant Paul Essenden experienced a revulsion of feeling at encountering his gaze—that sorrowful, inquiring gaze, devoid of all anger or fear, at the formidable obstacle which had arisen in the way. For an instant it was the George Carr of the Australian days, of the later period when Nella was with him, and he seemed striving to forget the past and make amends for it; not the wretch who had killed poor Horace, but the man whom, with all his faults, he had always liked.

“ You may take your hand from my throat, Paul,”

he said quietly. "I give in—I will make no effort to escape."

"Is your word to be trusted?" asked Paul.

"Sometimes," was the quiet answer.

Paul released his hold, and Carr said—

"Which way shall we go?"

"Towards the constable's house in the village," replied Paul; "and I warn you, George Carr, that any attempt to escape will be unsuccessful, and may cost you your life."

"My life," said Carr, with a bitter laugh. "What a threat to hold out to me!"

They walked on slowly together down the road, Paul keeping step as well as he could with his companion, who limped like a man very tired or very feeble. How he had aged, thought Paul, since he had seen him last. He had heard of men who had experienced heavy disappointment, or were burdened by great secrets, becoming suddenly lined and grey, but a living example of sorrow or crime had never been so strikingly exemplified before him as in this man. He wondered now that he had ever recognised him; that even from the first moment of his passing on the high road he had felt certain that George Carr had come back to Deeneford.

"I wished that it had been any one's hand except yours, Paul," said Carr, as he walked on; "I could

have borne an arrest better by those whose business it is to capture wretches like myself. This thief-taking is a new profession of yours, and it is not a graceful one. It becomes not the man whom I have ever respected."

" You have no right to respect me," said Paul sternly ; " the days are gone by when you or I had respect for each other. I am he that should arrest you, and consign you to the doom you merit; for you struck down an unarmed man, and you are too dangerous to live."

" Had he been spared, what further mischief might he not have committed to disgrace honest homes, and break hearts full of more truth than his ?"

" You dare to talk like this ?" cried Paul, turning his blazing eyes upon him, " and to me, his brother ? "

" I have dared more than that in my time," replied Carr ; " and it is not the wrath of one who has honoured me by his friendship that I fear so much as I regret. For Nella's sake I regret this night."

" Why think of her, over whose life you have cast a deeper shadow by your actions ? You have no claim upon her—you are not worthy to mention her name."

" Poor Nella ; perhaps I am not. But she does

not think so. She would go away with me and my sins to-morrow, feeling sure that under her guidance I should be safe from further harm. She would share my disgrace rather than that I should wander over the world, the outcast that fate has made of me. And forgetting all of you, there might, even to the dregs of life, come a something to atone for all."

"It is strange that you who loved her so much could not have thought how this bloody deed would separate you from her."

"Ah, there are things that puzzle us, Paul," said Carr, "and that only time or eternity can explain."

"When my name was Paul to you, you were a man professing repentance for a misspent life, and I was glad to call you friend; but now——"

"Yes, I understand," said Carr quickly; "I am sorry that I have hurt your feelings by mentioning your Christian name. The habit has grown upon me, Mr. Essenden, and the past of which you have spoken has come closer to me to-night."

"What did you want at the rectory with Mr. Gifford?"

"The address of my daughter."

"And he gave it you—he made no attempt to arrest you as a murderer, but he let you go as though you were his accomplice? You were the man who had removed his wife's lover from his path, and, by

Heaven ! in his heart I think that he is grateful to you."

" You were not quick in attributing evil to your fellow-men once," said Carr—" rather too ready to make excuses, and seeing good—some good—in all of them. How you have changed ! "

" With all that has changed round me—yes."

" And not having one thought for me, not seeing one excuse in all that conduct which has reduced me thus low ? " said Carr, almost reproachfully.

" What excuse is there for so foul a deed ? " asked Paul. " Say that Horace was afraid of Nella's knowledge of his love for Mrs. Gifford, and that he betrayed her to secure his safety. It was a coward's act, of which he was the first to repent, and you might have taken a less deadly vengeance."

" But say that I knew not what I did in my despair, when I saw the ashes with which he had strewn a path which seemed leading up to heaven before I met him," cried Carr, more warmly ; " say that I saw before me a gentle, delicate woman consigned to penal servitude—I, who knew well what penal servitude was like : was I to suffer the man who had worked this mischief to triumph in his cunning, and rejoice in the greater security which my child's imprisonment afforded him ? You, who knew the secrets of my past, and understood the

devil in my nature that I prayed against, to think that I could tamely suffer the wrong, or allow my daughter's abasement to go unavenged, with him exulting in the ruin that he had heaped on me."

"It was a bloody vengeance," muttered Paul.

Carr stopped and looked his companion in the face again. Paul stopped with him, on his guard against any new design that George Carr might have formed in the ready wit which had saved him more than once, and yet had been his curse through life.

"Paul," said Carr, "and for the last time in life I call you Paul, remembering what you have been, and how closely allied you might have been to me, I will own that I am sorry for the past—that I see now the littleness of man's vengeance, and how it recoils upon the head of him who would take the place of his God, and strike at the wronger. It is your turn now, but some day there will come a thought to you that it might have been better to have let me pass on in my misery than to have handed me over to that justice which demands my death. Your brother can never say to me, 'I forgive you, Carr, for all your narrow estimate of what my sins deserved,' but there is left me time to say to you I bear no malice in my heart against you, and I wish no one in the world a better life than Paul Essenden."

They were standing in the high road before the rickety police-station—wherein two constables resided, and occasionally locked up a tipsy villager—and here George Carr stopped, as though he knew the place, and it was necessary to prove that he was a man of his word, and intended no escape. It was his hand, even, which unlatched the gate that opened on to the strip of garden-path leading up to the front door. He looked like a man going to his home rather than to a gibbet; and it was a strange, resolute face, on which one could read how little he cared for the life that was left in him.

"It would have been better, perhaps, had a stranger done poor Horace this justice," said Paul moodily; "there, I think you are right, Carr."

"It may be another pang to her," said Carr, "but she is used to suffering, and must have fancied that such an end as this was probable enough. Only I wish now that they had not told her I was dead."

He extended his hand suddenly to Paul, who would not see it, but kept his own hands in his pockets, after the old habit which remained to him in his newer estate.

"You will not shake hands with me then?" said Carr. "I have given up, and you are successful, and yet there is no mercy in your triumph."

"I triumph not," answered Paul.

"I am your prisoner, and you avenge his death. Cannot enmity between us cease from this hour, and you regard me as the man sinned against as well as sinning? It will be an honour, sir, to let me clasp your hand as though for an instant I was the old friend once more. It will give me courage to ask a favour of you."

"I will fulfil any wish of yours that is a fair and honest one," said Paul, "but do not ask me to touch the hand that slew my brother. Man, have you no feelings?"

"Yes, yes; I had forgotten," said Carr, letting his arm drop heavily to his side; "you are right and I am wrong: even in little matters, as well as in great ones, always wrong, George Carr!"

"What do you require of me?" asked Paul.

"To see Nella, and tell her that I met you in the lane, and surrendered myself to you. I did give myself up you know; for I might in a struggle have found my old strength come back, and so have mastered you; but I resigned, being weary—awfully weary—of life, and seeing that it was better it should end thus, than that I should drag on, perplexing every one. Speak kindly to her, and let her think the best of me that she can, knowing that when I lost her I lost the little self-restraint which gave her hopes of me once. And see her more

often, sir ; ask that good woman who saved Nella by her interest and sympathy to see her too.' You don't know yet how grateful we Carrs can be. Bring her to Kliston, where they will take me tomorrow, and in the hope of meeting her again I shall not look forward with regret. I have so much to tell her."

Paul dashed back the gate which Carr had closed upon himself, and with the giant's strength that possessed him that night, he swung the outcast into the roadway, and then released his hold.

" Go ; I will not have your death upon my conscience. I will not stand between you and your last hopes. I relinquish my revenge for the sake of the woman I loved, and for the man I called my friend once. Years ago in the bush you restored to me a life which was hardly worth restoring ; take your own in exchange now, and pray God to amend it. Go. I will not answer for my treachery to him slain in Deeneford Park, if you remain an instant longer."

" What is liberty to me ? "

" Life to Nella, and she at least can be spared this last affliction."

" For Nella's sake, then, be it so. For my own I do not care to thank you."

He went slowly along the road with his head bent

low, and looked not back again ; and Paul, at a swift pace, strode away from him, as though he would outwalk the temptation to re-arrest him, or the weakness which had come upon him at the last, and balked him in the hour of his triumph.

Was it an echo of George Carr's words that escaped him as he walked ?

“ For Nella's sake, be it so.”

CHAPTER THE SIXTH.

NEW PLANS.

THE REVEREND THEOBALD GIFFORD kept to his study the greater portion of the next day, and spent the time in writing many letters, which he tore afterwards into fragments, as though their contents displeased him, despite the labour of composition which he had evidently bestowed upon them. He succeeded in the afternoon in composing two letters to his mind, and by that time Augusta had become anxious concerning him, and had gone up to his study, where she found the door locked against her for the first time in her life.

She was prepared for a certain amount of eccentricity in her brother's actions, but she had never known him lock himself away from her before—on the contrary, it was a habit of his to leave the study door ajar; and she attributed his motive to the offence which he had taken at her words last night, and which offence he might not feel inclined to pardon. But he told her from his room that he was not

offended with her, that it was foolish of her to imagine that he had taken offence at anything which she had said, that he was simply busy, excessively busy, but should be down to dinner at five o'clock he hoped. At half-past four he rang his study bell violently and ordered his groom to saddle a horse and be prepared to ride to Kliston, and at five o'clock to the minute he entered the drawing-room with two sealed letters in his hands.

Augusta went to him and kissed him, and was astonished at the smile with which his worn face greeted her.

"It seems a novelty to be busy now, Gus," he said, "but, please Heaven, the busy times for me are coming back again."

He never called her by that familiar name without his heart was less full of gloom than usual, and Augusta rejoiced at his new manner.

"I want James to ride with these letters to Kliston," he said; "they are important, and the mail does not leave that town till nine o'clock at night. I save a day by this method. Place them in his hands yourself, please."

He gave the letters to his sister, who glanced at the superscriptions, and then looked at him in amazement as she repeated half-aloud the names upon the envelopes.

" 'Miss Carr'——'Mrs. Gifford,' " she said.

" I thought they would surprise you ; the contents would surprise you more, perhaps, knowing what an obstinate fellow you have always thought me, Gus. For you have never given me credit for a fair consideration of the rights and wrongs of those about me."

" Have I not ? " she asked.

" You think I disregard the rights, and brood too much upon the wrongs," he said ; " and am not so good a man as my profession warrants. We shall see, dear."

" Have you anything to tell me ? "

" A great deal after dinner," he replied.

Augusta hesitated at the door with the letters still.

" What are you waiting for ? " he asked less kindly.

" Might I not give you some advice—that is, offer you my opinion upon the motives for sending off these letters ? " asked Augusta ; " you might wish to add something more presently."

" No, I think not—I am sure not. Do not keep the man waiting outside, when he might be on his journey. There is nothing, Augusta, in those letters but which you will approve, and thank me for."

She went away marvelling more than ever at the sudden change in him, which seemed even to Au-

gusta a change for the better in the home surroundings, or brother Theo would have never looked so bright. It was stepping back to better days at once, when he was less despondent.

He was conversational at dinner ; he had his little boy Theo to dine with him, and the nurse to wait upon him ; he spoke of village matters, parish doings, Mr. Small his curate, and the frosty weather which would not go away. He drank one glass more wine at dinner than he was in the habit of doing, and then, after bidding his son good-night, and recommending him always to be a good boy, he offered his arm to his sister, and in this formal manner escorted her back into the drawing-room.

“ I see that you are very anxious, or at least very curious, Gus,” he said, when they were both seated, she before the costly tea-service, and he on the couch near her.

“ I must confess that at least I am curious, Theo.”

“ Ah, that is like a woman,” he said, and the spasmodic twitching at his mouth was almost an effort to smile again, after years of self-repression.

He seemed nervous also, and it was less of the old manner than the new which characterised him, and which Augusta noticed. As he reached out his hand for the cup of tea she held towards him, it shook a little, she detected, and the cup clattered noisily in

the saucer for awhile ; but there was a brighter look upon him, and that made amends for all, and gave her hope of good news.

"I think that I prepared you last night sufficiently, Augusta, for a coming change, by speaking of an appointment connected with a mission in India that was likely to fall to my lot some day. I said that I was waiting for the post, dear."

"Yes."

"Well, that was an evasion of which I am ashamed, for I prefer speaking frankly all that is in my mind ; but I was afraid of the shock coming too suddenly upon you. The post was really offered to me, and accepted by me two days ago."

The cup clattered more noisily in the saucer as he spoke. He must have been anxious concerning the result of his revelation to his sister, or after all it had not become pleasant tidings to communicate.

"It is a great surprise," said Augusta thoughtfully.

"I was irritable and nervous last night, as you perceived, for the time was hastening on, and you were standing alone in the world, and very friendless, and I could not see, Gus, in the distance, what was in store for you."

"You must not trouble yourself about me. Leave

me to time, and to that patience which I think I have, and which will always keep me strong."

"It is not wise to be confident in one's strength," he said, passing the cup back to his sister, "for there are times when the mind gives to the storm, and the strong man is worse than a child. There is no real strength in any of us—we are all weak vessels of clay, that can be dashed to pieces by the first blow of the Divine hand."

"And this post in India?" asked Augusta, seeing that his smiles had vanished, and that it was the old grim look upon him again.

"Was accepted two days ago. Accepted cheerfully, despite the pangs of separation from you, for in the new life abroad I saw a hope for me."

"And when do you leave us?"

"In three days."

"So soon!" cried Augusta. "Oh, Theo, have you quite considered this new step, and all that it necessitates?"

"I have been all day considering it," he said. "I believe that everything has been satisfactorily arranged."

"How long will you remain in India?"

"Ten years; perhaps longer."

"I must accompany you," said Augusta.

"That is impossible."

"Then I will follow you when you are settled in the country. What part of India is it?"

"Oh, a long way from the cities—near the great hills. I will tell you all about it to-morrow, and show you Warwick's letter to me. I want to speak about the boy and yourself now."

"Well."

He took a second cup of tea from his sister, and then returned it hastily, saying that he required no more, and Augusta noticed that his hand still shook strangely.

"I wish you to look with cheerfulness at this proposed expedition," he said imploringly, "and not to dash me down in the beginning with that mournful aspect. Believe that this step saves me, Gus—saves, perhaps, my mind from giving way—and beg me to go also. Why, I have been dying by inches, although no one has detected much difference in me—I have masked my sense of disgrace and torture so completely."

Augusta Gifford was of a different opinion, but she did not express it then.

"In three days," she repeated sadly; "and the living of Deeneford?"

"That is all arranged. You will have to leave here. I have spoken to Mrs. Martin concerning that, and she will offer you the shelter of her home, and

be like the mother whom you and I lost early. Or there is the villa where you used to live, and, with Nella for your companion, you will not be entirely alone until the time comes to make *his* home bright."

"How secretly you have kept these plans from me?"

"It is a surprise, perhaps. I hope an agreeable one."

"How can parting with you, knowing that you wish to go away alone, be a pleasurable thought?"

"Not alone. I must take the boy," said Mr. Gifford, evading her look, by turning away his head from her. "I have made up my mind to take him with me."

"He is too young—the climate will kill him, Theo."

"No—he is a strong boy. I have asked Doctor Rivers's opinion, and he says that the change of climate will not hurt him. And the nurse will have no objection to accompany him, I dare say; if she has, there will be no great difficulty in procuring a substitute in Deeneford."

Augusta sat bewildered for awhile, and then with some of her old sharpness she attacked this crafty brother, who had matured his plans without her.

"No, no, Theo, you must not plot like this without my having a voice in the matter," she cried, "or leave me alone here, thinking that Paul Essenden will pity my loneliness, some day, and,

from his charitable feelings, make me an offer of his hand. That is a paltry scheming, which I will not have. I go with you, for I cannot trust you by yourself. You and I together, brother, to the end now. What are marriage and giving in marriage to you or me?"

Mr. Gifford appeared troubled. He did not admire his sister's firmness ; he knew what that was years ago, and how her will had been as powerful as his own to resist, when she felt sure that she was in the right. He did not like the turn which affairs had taken.

"I have been trouble enough to you already," he said, "and I will not remain a shadow on your life. I am resolved on that," he added, in a more impetuous tone of voice.

"We will talk of this to-morrow."

"Very well, Augusta, I think that that will be better, for the surprise has been too much for you. To-morrow," he said, "you will see with me how much better it is that you and I, if only for a little while, should be apart from one another."

"I will tell you what I think of this to-morrow, Theo," repeated Augusta. And he replied again—

"Very well."

There was a silence of some minutes' duration, during which he studied the colours in the hearth-rug, the fit of his boots, the shape of his finger-nails ; and did not care to meet his sister's eyes. He felt

uncomfortable beneath her gaze, as though he had another motive in his going away, and feared that she would tax him with it presently.

Her voice at his side quite startled him at last. She had drawn her chair closer to him, and rested her hands upon his arm.

“Tell me what you said to Nella in that letter, Theo?”

“I told her,” he said slowly, “that I was going away, and that you were likely to be left alone in Deeneford. That you and she had been old friends, and so well understood each other, that I was sure she would sink that morbid delicacy which had kept her from us, and come to you in the first moments of your sorrow. I have always fancied that you were fond of Nella. I am sure that her great—even her undeserved—misfortunes have purified her character, and made her worthy of your friendship, and it struck me suddenly this afternoon that for a time you might constitute her your companion.”

“Had such a trial been in store for me I would have preferred to be alone.”

“You do not regard Nella Carr with the old interest. Is it that the shadow of the prison rests upon her still?”

“No, it is not that. The prison shadow is beyond her, and her life and resignation have raised her

rather than humiliated her. But I could not have borne any sympathy with my trouble at parting with you, if I had even been resolved to stay."

Again the doubt expressed of her remaining in Deeneford without him ; but he would not press the question further that night. She had not had time to consider the matter fully, and he would leave the question open till the morrow. Sufficient for that day all the evil or the good which his decision had brought to that house.

Still he was not quite satisfied, and he did not present so cheerful an appearance as he had done an hour or two since. He was inclined to be angry now, as though Augusta had a secret wish to frustrate his intentions, and deprive him of the one chance which lay before him, the only one in which he had shown any great interest for years. She might have thought less of herself and more of him, he fancied, with a swelling breast ; and had he not been a strong, hard man, whom nothing moved, it is possible, he considered, that he would have shed a few tears of mortification at the way in which his plans had been received by her.

" Now tell me, Theo," she said, and again he started at her voice so close to him, and was vexed at his own nervousness, " all that you said to Laura in your letter to her ? "

"Who—who is Laura?" he asked.

"Ah, you will not acknowledge her by that name. I had hoped——"

"Yes, I know what you have hoped," he said quickly; "do not forestall me, and I will tell you every word."

He looked hard before him, as though he were trying to recollect the tenor of his letter, then leaned back in his chair, and said—

"I informed her that I was going to India with the boy immediately—that an important post had been offered me, and that it was even doubtful—extremely doubtful—if I should return to England again."

"You told me that you might return in ten years," said Augusta quickly.

"Or longer," he added; "and for ever is a longer time, I presume? But all this is a matter of doubt. Do I assert anything positively, Augusta?" he asked tetchily.

"No—go on."

"Of what was I speaking?"

"Of your letter to your wife," said Augusta.

"I know that," he answered sharply; "of course I have not forgotten that, but the point at which I left off in that missive to her. You have a bad habit—it has been always your worst failing—of break-

ing in upon one's explanation with questions of your own that confuse the person speaking."

" You were saying——"

" Yes, I know very well," he said, in the same quick tones, " that I might never return to England. I told her that, and added that, as she might wish to see her boy again before he went away with me, she might come on to Deeneford, if it pleased her. That I would offer no opposition to her coming, providing always that she did not seek me out, or endeavour to distress me by any false sentiment in which I was not likely to take interest."

" You might have spared her that, and yet not have met her, Theo."

" Yes, I might," he answered. " I thought so afterwards, for I did not wish to wound her further by my taunts of her sincerity. Before the letter was closed it suggested itself to me that, as we were parting for ever, I might have been—more—charitable."

He said this very slowly, pausing between every word he uttered.

" And you were, Theo?—say you were!" said Augusta earnestly.

" Well, I was," he answered with a heavy sigh, as though he regretted his long obstinacy, or was sorry for his firmness giving way at last—it was doubtful

which. "I said that, as I passed to a new life away from hers, and should be as it were dead to her from that time, I could not leave without saying that I forgave all the misery that she had brought upon me. Just as I would have spoken to her on my death-bed, girl, and so have ended all enmity between us."

"Oh, my dear Theo, I am so glad, so very, very glad to hear this."

She clasped him in her arms and cried upon his breast, and he smoothed her hair with his trembling hands, and bade her not unnerve him by her agitation.

"I can believe in the brighter times, now that you are changing," she said, looking up once more—"now that your heart softens after these long years of impenetrability. This is only the beginning of forgiveness."

"The beginning and the end," he murmured.

"I see you beckoning across the sea for her to come to you one day, or you returning full of that mercy which is dawning in your heart."

"No," he said, shuddering; "I have forgiven her weakness and want of faith, but her want of love for me can never place her by my side again. I will not speak of her."

He started to his feet, as though with the inten-

tion of leaving the room precipitately, and then paused as a heavy knocking at the outer door arrested him, and led him to look wildly at his sister, also startled by the late summons.

"Who can it be?" he said in a harsh whisper. "The letters will not reach them till to-morrow, and they can have learned no tidings of my going yet awhile. Warwick would not come to say that it was all a mistake, all pure invention on my part, and that there is no appointment waiting for me anywhere. George Carr cannot have come back again, surely it is not George Carr?"

"George Carr? is he not dead, Theo?" asked Augusta.

"No, unless it was his spirit that I met last night on the grass-plat," he said shortly; "but I would rather it were Warwick than that man."

The door opened, and Mr. Gifford went nearer to his sister, as though he were uncertain that his wife might not enter to embarrass him with her gratitude for his forgiveness of her.

"Who is it? who is it?" he asked twice of the servant who came into the room.

"Miss Carr, sir, if you please."

"Admit her—show her in. She is here already by some strange instinct—a consciousness that we needed her. Ah, Miss Carr, you have come, then."

Nella advanced towards them hurriedly, with a face of terror, that assured them both it was not sorrow for them, or concern for the minister's departure, that had brought her there thus unexpectedly. She walked with difficulty across the room towards Augusta Gifford, as to the one faithful breast where she was sure that sympathy and love would always meet her.

"What has happened, Nella?" asked Augusta, as she folded her arms round her.

"I want you to do your best for him—to advise me what to do. I have only you to think for me in this last and greatest trouble."

"We will help you, Nella. And we will help him, if we can; if he is not—if he is not your father?"

"My father, madam, who killed Horace Essenden, and who was arrested this morning for his murder. Oh, tell me what to do for him!"

CHAPTER THE SEVENTH.

MR. GIFFORD ATTEMPTS CONSOLATION.

AUGUSTA GIFFORD's arms tightened round the weeping girl in sympathy with her sorrow, and Mr. Gifford sat down quickly in his chair, overpowered by the news.

"It is all my fault, I have betrayed him," he said.

"You!" cried both women at once.

"He was here last night under my window, and begged for your address, Miss Carr," said Gifford, "and I gave it him, little thinking that it was the means to his destruction. I have betrayed that poor miserable wretch, and his curse will rest upon my head."

"No, no," said Nella, turning to him; "he was not arrested at Wilton, but at Kliston, whence he telegraphed to me."

"You have seen him, then?"

"Yes, I was allowed to see him this afternoon. He is very calm—so unlike himself, that it breaks my heart to look at him."

"Why?" asked Mr. Gifford.

"Because he has no hope. He is resigned to his fate, and would console me by his fortitude. As if ever consolation could come to me again."

"Patience," murmured Mr. Gifford.

"Ah, sir, you cannot understand what a depth of suffering is in me," said Nella.

She took the seat which Augusta placed for her, and then looked from brother to sister very anxiously. She thought that they would assist her now, though her father's revenge on Horace Essenden had darkened both their lives; she felt that she might come to them for help under any circumstances, and that they would not turn away from her.

"I can understand all your suffering, Miss Carr," said Gifford gravely, "for I have suffered myself and know what human sorrow is. But you must be patient."

"I am not impatient, only anxious," answered Nella.

"There is no greater folly than fretting at the inevitable," the minister said oratorically, "or that which may appear inevitable to us. It is better to look forward trustfully, however black and solid may appear the wall between you and all better times. The light must come, the world must change, and we with it. There is no unmitigated calamity on earth, Nella; and even if there were, the heaven will

come in God's time to such as you. Here or hereafter that peace which passeth all understanding will meet you and fill your heart with joy."

Augusta was surprised at these remarks. It was a good sign of Theo's own better thoughts, she considered—of his having outlived the bitterest portion of his life, and seeing in the future that contentment for him which he preached to Nella.

Nella listened, but took little comfort from his words. The heaven's peace seemed far away yet, and on the earth the troubles thickened round her.

"Tell me what to do for him," she said again.

"He asked you to come to me?" inquired Mr. Gifford.

"Yes, he told me that he was sure that you would see that his case was fairly conducted; and that though he had no hope, though he did not care for himself in any way, and was prepared for the worst, still he trusted that you and your sister, who had always been our friends, would think of him a little."

"I will think of him," said Mr. Gifford slowly; "a rash and a mistaken man, but not wholly bad, this George Carr; I have never considered him my enemy. He bewildered me by awful truths, but they were truths, and I accepted them. He never played me false, and I will do my best for him."

"Thank you," murmured Nella.

"But my sister lost her lover," he said, with a sudden acrimony that startled both his listeners ; "and though he was unjust in every word and action, and made his love for her a mask the better to conceal his guilty heart, she thinks that George Carr blighted her whole life, when he may have been—which of us can tell now?—her greatest benefactor."

"Surely there is no occasion to speak of this," cried Augusta indignantly—"to speculate on what might have happened had the life of Horace Essenden been spared. I have forgiven his want of faith in me—pray you to be forgiven, Theo, for your want of charity."

"We all need forgiveness," he replied, suddenly becoming very grave and sad, "and we will not waste time in idle discussion or recrimination. In three days from this, as Augusta will inform you presently, Miss Carr, I leave England for ever. I wrote to you this afternoon, apprising you of my intention, and asking you to stay with my sister for awhile, until the pangs of parting were recovered from, for she and I have been together all our lives, and have always understood each other well."

"We will talk of this to-morrow," said Augusta. "There is to be no parting between us, Theo ; and therefore, we need not trouble Nella by this news, in which, I am sure, she can take no interest now.

She is greatly distressed, and we must think of her. If I do not love your father, Nella," she added, "my interest in you is greater and stronger than it ever was, and you may trust me in your service."

"Yes; I know that," replied Nella gratefully; "but—but what is to become of him if you go away thus speedily?"

"It shall all be arranged," said Mr. Gifford. "My solicitors shall conduct the case at my expense, and spare no money to obtain the best counsel."

"Money is not the consideration, Mr. Gifford—that, I can at least supply."

"It is very necessary, even for your sake, that I leave England, for I shall be subpoenaed as a witness to the words of vengeance that he uttered, when he came to my hotel in London and told me what a villain Horace Essenden was," continued Gifford; "my evidence would only help to hang him."

Nella shuddered.

"I had forgotten that," she said. "I had hoped that your voice might have spoken for him and his new life, as it spoke up for me at Kliston once. Oh, sir, he was mad with grief then—he must have been; and they will not kill him for an unpremeditated crime, and commit a greater murder in the name of justice."

"Perhaps not," said Mr. Gifford; "there is no

telling what a day may bring forth, for all is wisely hidden from our view. His life may be spared, there may not be sufficient evidence to prove him guilty, for all his long concealment, and despite the reward that has been offered for him. I will ride over to Kliston the first thing in the morning and see my lawyer on this matter."

"Thank you," said Nella, rising. Mr. Gifford and his sister both regarded this movement with surprise.

"You will remain with us," said Theo; "you cannot think of returning to Kliston to-night?"

"A post-chaise is awaiting me," said Nella, "and I cannot rest away from him."

"But you are looking ill, Nella," said Augusta anxiously; "the excitement of the day has been too much for you."

"No, no, I think not," Nella replied wearily.

"You must stay to-night," urged Mr. Gifford, "and I will proceed to Kliston in your stead. You can do no good there; I shall be able to render some service, and be ready in the morning to begin this serious business."

"And in the morning you and I will proceed to Kliston together, Nella," said Augusta. "There, you must not overtask your strength at such a time as this."

"If you will depart then, sir, I shall feel that

something is already being done for him," said Nella, "and that you are again the best of friends to me."

"And you will remain with Augusta?"

"Until the morning, if you wish it."

Mr. Gifford proceeded to make the necessary arrangements for his departure; the excitement of Nella and her anxiety had given a new turn to his thoughts, and he was excited himself, and seemed glad of this new opportunity for action. He left the room, and very shortly returned equipped for travelling; he kissed his sister, shook hands with Nella, bade her maintain her courage, have faith still in the future and in his exertions to make it brighter for her, and then went hurriedly away on his new mission.

CHAPTER THE EIGHTH.

A STRANGE NIGHT.

AUGUSTA GIFFORD and Nella Carr retired early to their rooms that night. There was much to do to-morrow, and both were anxious to be alone, and to rest after the excitement of the day. It was not possible for those two to discuss the one absorbing subject of George Carr's arrest. Their views of George Carr's life and temptations were different. To one he was the man who had sinned against all hope of pardon, to the other he was one who had been tried beyond his strength and given way.

Augusta Gifford had no sympathy to spare for the criminal. She could not understand the revenge that could strike in the dark, or see one excuse for it; and Nella's sorrow only touched her heart so far as it affected Nella herself. She regretted the arrest of Carr; he had confessed to her that he was a man repentant for his crime, and if he had died in America, as it had been rumoured, she thought it would have been better for them all. Over the old story

the veil would have hung for ever ; and now there was the retracing link by link of the past evidence, and shame and sorrow following that grim array of facts which were being marshalled in the foreground to dismay them all.

Her brother Theo had spoken of quitting the country in order to refrain from giving evidence in the case, but his evidence was already on record, and there was no escape from the publicity which she feared. She could not see to the end yet. It was very misty beyond her, and harm must come to the Giffords, Paul Essenden and his aunt, as well as to poor Nella.

She sat in her own room thinking of this long after she had bidden Nella good-night, thinking also, as the hours lengthened, of all that had preceded it, and of the sudden determination of her brother to go to India with his boy, and leave her—had she allowed herself to remain passive in the matter—to fight out her battle alone. That resolution was a new and painful perplexity to her. She scarcely understood it, and though she had taken hope from it earlier that night, still there was a something more which appeared to show itself and pain her, as she sat alone now. She was not quite satisfied with her brother's manner, or with that reserve which could so thoroughly disguise his

real intentions till within three days of their accomplishment. She could not remember that he had been of a reticent disposition before—on the contrary, he had had an unpleasant habit of speaking out all that was in his mind, and turning many friends and acquaintances against him. He had been always a proud and cold man; to his wife he had been a being to be feared rather than loved, despite his deep affection for her; to his servants a somewhat exacting master; to his sister affectionate if dogmatic, and at times hard to conciliate, but he had never been disposed to keep back his thoughts from any one. There had been great changes in Theo Gifford's home, and poor Theo had changed with them, being no better than other men, and, after all his self-confidence, no stronger to resist.

Had the change resulted in an improvement in his character at the eleventh hour? She did not know. She was more certain that it had a few hours since, when he was speaking hopefully of his journey, and telling her that he bore no longer malice in his heart against the woman who had once professed to love him.

Augusta awoke from her reverie to find that she had thought the fire out, the wax candle almost into its socket, and the night into another day. By the French clock on the mantelpiece the time was twenty

minutes past twelve. She must have sat there brooding for hours on all the strange things which had shadowed her young life. It must have been the cold which had finally aroused her, for she began shivering violently as she rose and moved about the room. She had sat there too long, she thought, and the frost had stolen upon her and found its way to her heart. She felt nervous, too, although she had never been a weak-minded woman. But they had spoken that night of the murder done at Deeneford three years and some months since, and all that had happened then seemed to have come very close upon her. It was not her usual custom, but she thought that she would lock her door, and then hasten to her bed and endeavour to sleep off the feeling of uncertainty—almost of horror—that had suddenly stolen over her.

As she turned the key in the lock a hand outside began knocking gently on the panels of the door. All in the house, she thought, had been asleep for hours, and the sudden noise dismayed her.

“Who is there?” she said in a low, agitated voice.

“It is I—Nella—please let me in.”

“What has happened—what is the matter?” she asked, less for information’s sake, than to make sure

that it was Nella's voice whispering in the corridor at that hour of the night.

"I do not know; I wish to tell you what I have seen," replied Nella.

The voice assured her, and Augusta unlocked the door and admitted her late visitor.

Nella was dressed also. The same thoughts, or many of the same thoughts which had kept Augusta Gifford wakeful, had rendered Nella, despite all her fatigue, restless also. She acknowledged that as she came into the room.

"I have not been able to sleep, Miss Gifford; I have been sitting up thinking of him and praying for him. I am glad that you are wakeful too, for I wish to ask you a few questions."

"Concerning what, or whom?"

"Your brother."

"My brother!" said Augusta, looking into the widely distended eyes of Nella; "what has made you think of him in the middle of the night like this, and brought you here with questions that might have been deferred till the morning? The journey has unsettled you."

"Will you let me ask one question, please?" said Nella, very earnestly—"a question that I could not have slept without asking to have saved my life, for I am terribly anxious—terribly distressed."

"Go on ; what is it ?" said Augusta, alarmed by Nella's manner.

"Have you noticed lately any—anything strange in Mr. Gifford, as if—as if his troubles had weighed too heavily upon him—an eccentricity, in fact, that might lead him to do strange things, to make sudden resolutions and alter them as suddenly? You may have noticed this, for a change in one dear to us is not long overlooked."

"Why do you ask ?"

"I will tell you presently. Let me know if I am right in my conjecture that you have observed this."

"He has been unsettled since the separation from his wife. Poor Theo ! he loved her very much, you know, and when his faith was shaken in her he changed for the worse."

"But did his mind change also ?" asked Nella in an eager whisper ; "does he say and do strange things, and have you ever thought that that troubled mind was giving way."

"My God—no !" exclaimed Augusta ; "and yet he has been very strange of late, and—and that appointment in India of which he has spoken may not be true, for all that I know. Nella, what have you seen or heard since we bade each other good-night ?"

“Your brother.”

“He is at Kliston.”

“No, he is in the house. In the room at the end of the corridor ; I have heard him muttering there for an hour or more. You can see the light from the open door across the landing now.”

“My brother—Theo !” gasped forth Augusta. “I—I cannot believe this.”

“Courage, keep strong,” said Nella. “I may be full of fancies—he may have come back for important reasons, and have crept cautiously into the house for fear of alarming us by his late return. We—we will not think him mad so quickly.”

“Mad!” exclaimed Augusta Gifford indignantly ; “how dare you think that he is mad ? He may have been a little eccentric, for he was always an eccentric man, but you must not terrify me without fair cause. Nella, what have you seen him do or heard him say so different from himself, that you come to tell me he is mad ?”

“Oh, don’t ask me !” almost shrieked Nella ; “I may have waked up and dreamt it all—I may be walking in my sleep still—I may be going mad myself !”

Augusta Gifford opened the door, and peered down the dark landing-place in order to be convinced of one part of Nella Carr’s strange narration.

She paused, and then moved a step or two further from the room, standing at last beyond it, and gazing at the light streaming through the doorway in the distance—that light which had already scared Nella Carr, and brought her to her room.

"It is his study," she whispered when Nella was beside her, "but my brother may not be there."

"Yes, he is there," whispered Nella back again.

"I will go to him."

"No, don't—not yet, at least," said Nella, as her hands tightened on her companion's arm; "you are not prepared, and he says awful things whilst he writes."

"He is writing, then?"

"Yes."

"He always reads aloud what he writes—it was a habit of his when he composed his sermons. Why, what is there to be afraid of in that, Nella?"

Augusta almost smiled at this; it seemed as if a weight had been taken from her heart; but Nella did not appear relieved by the explanation.

"Don't go yet awhile," she entreated; but Augusta took no heed of this second warning, and went noiselessly along the passage, followed by Nella Carr. At the study door, which was half open, she paused, and Nella came and took her place beside her. The door was not open sufficiently

wide to disclose the occupant of the room, and Augusta, despite the restraining influence which Nella seemed to exercise, pushed it further back upon its hinges, which creaked a little, though they did not disturb the study of the man within. Yes, it was Theo Gifford, whom they had thought was already at Kliston, and who was seated at his library table, with the full glare of his reading lamp upon him, a haggard and wild student. He had taken off his neckcloth, as though the heat of the room, even on that frosty night, had become unbearable to him ; and the hand which supported his head had wandered and clutched at his premature white hair, and given him a strange, distraught appearance. Looking at him then, with that eager, furrowed face, with his eyes glaring at the paper before him, and his lips muttering over its contents, it was not difficult to believe in the new fears which had possessed Nella Carr so suddenly.

He had finished writing—if he had been writing, for the paper in his hand looked somewhat worn—and was reading the document attentively, even with an awful interest, or he could have never assumed that look in that hour. “‘And as he passed me,’” the deep voice murmured, “‘I raised the stick which I had in my hand—the silver-headed stick which is hidden in the wood—and struck at

him with all my strength and hate. It was the devil in me that I could not hold back, and I knew the blow was death to him. I felt it would be death, when he fell forwards crying out my name in his surprise, and for a moment I rejoiced to think that he could do no further harm to me ! ” ”

“ It is that which he reads over and over again,” whispered Nella to Augusta ; “ nothing but that. Oh, what can you think it means ? ” ”

“ Heaven have mercy upon me, I know not ! ” ” gasped forth Augusta ; “ I fear that his mind has given way.” ”

“ Hush ! he is reading again.” ”

“ I will not hear it : we have no right to spy upon a good man thus,” cried Augusta ; then she passed into the room, whilst Nella hesitated on the threshold still, as though beyond there was a something which she could not face.

CHAPTER THE NINTH.

AN ACCUSATION.

THEOBOLD GIFFORD was not aware that his sister was upon him till her hand touched his shoulder, when he sprang up with a cry that daunted her and him, and backed against the library table, with the paper crumpled in his hands behind him. It was a terrible face then at which she gazed so lovingly and earnestly—a livid face, full of suffering and terror, with the grey lips quivering like a woman's.

“What—what do you want here, Augusta?” he said hoarsely at last.

“I heard that there were noises in the house,” she answered, “and came to satisfy myself. Why have you not gone to Kliston? What has led you to obtain admittance in this stealthy manner? Are you not well?”

“I—I am very well,” he said; “I came back for a paper which it was important to secure, and which I felt must not be left behind. I thought of it suddenly on my journey, and returned in haste.

"Why were you not in your bed?" he demanded sharply.

"I had been sitting up thinking of all the troubles around us, Theo. What paper is it that interests you thus deeply?"

"A sermon that I wrote some time since—that is all. I thought—I was sure that I could write and preach again; but the gift has left me wholly, and I wrote like a madman and a fool. I will never put pen to paper more, to disturb the little composure of mind that God has left me."

"Let me see that sermon, Theo," said Augusta in a coaxing manner, as she might have spoken to a child. "I am very, very anxious to read it, dear, if you will allow me?"

"It is all nonsense; I am ashamed of it. I was afraid it might be found amongst my papers, and disgrace me at a future time. What—what possible interest there can be in your seeing such a wretched composition as this, I am at a loss to comprehend."

Whilst he was speaking to her, the hand behind his back—the hand with the paper in it—was reaching towards the lamp-glass, where the flame was. Augusta did not see this in her earnestness—she had eyes only for his anxious looks—but the woman who had so long hesitated at the door had become aware of his intention, and as the paper

scorched and curled before breaking into flame above the chimney of the reading lamp, she rushed into the room with a wild scream for him to stop, and caught him by the wrist with both her hands.

"What is it now?" he shouted forth.

"Oh, don't burn it, sir; don't burn it, but let it go forth to the world and save the innocent! Give it to me!" implored Nella. "Trust me with it—let me save him and you; I will do both if you will let me!"

"It is this woman who is mad," cried Gifford, holding the paper aloft above her reach, and almost raising her from the floor in his strength as she still clung to him, "not I. See to her, Augusta; she is raving—she must be raving to go on like this!"

"I see it all! I see it all now from the beginning to the end. It was you who killed Horace Essenden, not my poor father! The light shines on the bloody deed at last!"

"Yes—yes, she is mad," said Gifford, shaking her from him by a great effort, "or she would never accuse me of so base a crime! Woman, I am a minister—I have been a good man all my life, and read my Bible, and preached hope to thousands from its holy texts. Dare you think for an instant, for a single instant, that I could so forget my whole

life's teachings, conduct, purpose, as to act so inconsistently and damnably?"

"'As he, Horace Essenden, passed you in the wood,'" cried Nella, quoting his words, "'you struck at him with all your hate and strength, and the blow was death to him.' You say it in that paper—that confession which your remorse has led you to write, but which your fear has kept back so long!"

"It is a lie—it is all a mistake," he said, correcting himself. "Nella Carr, you have done me an injustice. After all my efforts in your service, you turn upon me with the blackest ingratitude."

"That—that paper ——" said Nella in choking accents, and struggling to complete her sentence, which he finished for her.

"That paper, then," he said, "if you will know, and you will not spare yourself or me, is the confession of your father, George Carr. I would have kept it from you, Nella. I would have destroyed it to save him—I returned here to destroy it, lest a document which would at once condemn him to the gallows should be found as evidence against him. He wrote me that confession three years since, when he was anxious that I should not forget you, or not think of him too badly."

"Is this—is this true?" asked Nella, wavering at last.

That was an explanation for which she was not prepared, and once more she reached her hands out for the paper, as if eager to convince herself of all that he had said.

"It was his wish—his last wish, Nella," said Gifford, as his hand with the paper in it again set itself as far as possible from her, "that this should never meet your eyes, and I pledged my word that I would keep it from you. It was his generosity that led him to write this—his gratitude for my past kindness to you—his respect for me and Augusta. He saw that it was probable that a certain amount of suspicion might some day attach itself to me, when all the story of my separation from my wife became known to the world, and in confidence he committed it to my care, and for my protection. He was more generous in his thoughts of me than that daughter whom long ago we did our best to save."

"And who for ever is grateful, sir, believe me," answered Nella; "who would not have sought to harm you had you been even guilty of the murder; but would in that gratitude, and with all her heart, knowing you so well, have done her best to screen you. But I could not have let my father die, even for you, believing that he was innocent, and that I might have saved him."

"And do you think that, had he been innocent and I guilty, I would have suffered him to be hanged?" said Mr. Gifford haughtily. "Is it consistent with my character to play so vile a part as that?"

"Life is precious to us all," murmured Nella.

"Not to me; I have not much to live for, and I have lost caste in it," he answered moodily. "I would have saved George Carr's life at my own risk, had it been—had it been as you have ungenerously suspected."

"Forgive me, sir; I will suspect no longer. I know what your life and my father's have been, and I will accept your statement if——"

"If——" he repeated, with an angry stamp of his foot upon the floor.

"If you will let me see that paper, and disregard for once my father's wish concerning it. Under these terrible circumstances I am sure that he would grant that permission which you now refuse me."

"I shall see him to-morrow, I will ask his consent first," was the reply.

"Let her see it, then—the first good friend I ever had; the one who rescued me from wrong, and never yet deceived a living soul—who, pardon me, Mr. Gifford, I feel that I can trust more than you. My father once confessed to her that it was a

rash blow of his that killed poor Essenden ; let her read his story there, then, once again ?”

The rector of Deeneford glanced irresolutely at his sister, and then frowned at Nella for her persistence in a question which he would have set aside now. His pride was touched by this new appeal, his colour rose for an instant to his face, and then was replaced by that ghastly lividness which had at first shocked his watchers.

“ Yes, Theo, let me read it,” Augusta said, “ or at least glance through it, that I may assure this excited girl that her fears have given rise to her distrust, and that she might have judged you better even in this hour of her distress. For our honour’s sake, Theo, I must read it now.”

“ By what right, Augusta ?”

“ The right of my past love for him who met his death in Deeneford Park, the right of the love between you and me existing still. Theo,” she said, as his obstinate nature—all his life he had been an obstinate man—still refused to give way to dictation, “ trust me with it.”

He held the paper towards her at last, and though it shook a little as she took it from him, he made no further effort to hold out against them both. He seemed like a man aggrieved at this persecution, or like a man bewildered by a new and serious charge

which he was unable to refute at once, and he stood leaning against the library table with his hands pressing down upon it till it cracked beneath his weight.

Once he looked furtively over his shoulder at Augusta, as she bent towards the light, the better to decipher the closely-written manuscript, and then he turned away and looked neither right nor left again. The paper rustled and crackled behind him as the impatient fingers turned over its pages ; but he took no further heed. There was a strange, low, spasmodic sound, as of a cry repressed in its birth, that escaped his sister as she read there; but he only elevated his eyebrows for an instant, as if in surprise at her emotion over the history of her lover's death. There was a dark-eyed woman watching both of them, at whom he never gazed, and the pattern of his study-carpet was the only thing that interested him.

Augusta looked up at last, and said, in a low voice—

“ Yes, Nella—it is your father's confession of the murder.”

“ I am satisfied,” replied Nella. “ I have felt that it must be so ; but I wished for your word also, for you have always been a true woman, and far above us all.”

"Miss Carr might have put faith in my word too, without doing me an injustice," said Mr. Gifford sarcastically.

"Oh, sir, you are offended with me; you will not make allowance for my excitement—for the strange fact of your sudden return, and my hearing you read aloud that paper!"

"You should not have listened—it was neither fair nor generous; and now see to what unfair conclusions you have leaped. You have not treated me well—you——"

He turned round suddenly and caught his sister's wrist, as Nella had caught his a little while ago. Augusta Gifford held the paper over the study-lamp, and the confession was in flames before he had time to stop her. She was very white and firm, and as he met her eyes, his hold relaxed again.

"My brother was right, Nella—he came back in order to destroy this dangerous document; it deprives the murderer of all chance of an escape, and it is merciful to let his evidence against himself die out in this manner. There—he is safer now."

"Thank you, Miss Gifford. It is kind of you, who have suffered so much," said Nella, "to help me in this strait."

"It is our duty to help one another through life,

and to sacrifice much for one another sometimes," said Augusta mournfully.

Mr. Gifford took his white neckcloth from the table, and fastened it round his throat with trembling hands; then he seemed to grope his way like a blind man for his study-chair, into which he dropped heavily, and covered his wan face.

"The excitement, the aspersions on his good name, have been too much for him, Nella," said Augusta. "His has been so quiet and staid a life in its late isolation. Pray leave us now. To-morrow we three together will go to Kliston. Your presence seems to pain him."

"I will go," said Nella. Then, when she had reached the door, she returned, and was on her knees at the minister's side before he was aware of her. It was the old impulsive nature—true and warm-hearted—which had carried her to the feet of the benefactor to ask his pardon for the thoughts that she had had of him.

"I cannot go away without your forgiveness, sir, for those suspicions which I have had, and which I see now have been very base and worthless. I did not mean to pain you, but I was bewildered and knew not what I said, and I had had always a faint hope that my father was not the murderer of Horace Essenden. I forgot how good you were," she said,

"how kind and patient a man, how your holy calling——"

"Yes, yes ; say no more, Nella. I forgive you—with all my heart I forgive you. I know what a mind disturbed is as well as you, and what awful things it broods upon. We will say no more of this. I am very tired."

She rose at this indirect appeal to leave him, closed the door upon brother and sister, and went at once to her own room. She was unaware that Augusta Gifford opened the door after her, and watched her out of sight : that she turned and went back with a low, long cry into her brother's arms, which were outstretched to take her to his breast, if she would ever, in her goodness and purity, come for shelter there again.

"Oh, Theo, why did you kill him !" she wailed forth.

"Don't spare me—don't think of me again," he murmured, as his arms folded round her, and she sobbed upon his chest passionately and bitterly.

"I will only think of your peril, and of the dangers which you must avoid. For both our sakes—for your life's sake, Theo—you must fly ! "

CHAPTER THE TENTH.

“ POOR HUMANITY.”

THE REVEREND THEOBALD GIFFORD was silent for several minutes after Augusta's adjuration. His arms were clasped round his sister, and he looked fixedly ahead of him, as at the perils by which he was encompassed, and through which he must break his way to live.

“ You must fly, Theo,” she murmured again, “ at all risks it is necessary.”

“ I—I don't think that it is just,” he said irresolutely.

“ When you are safe from pursuit, you can rewrite that terrible confession, rescuing the man who has suffered much for us, and saving yourself and me.”

“ It would not be believed under those circumstances,” he replied moodily, “ and George Carr would be hanging from a scaffold before the truth had found its way to him.”

“ No, no, I would step forward as a witness too—

oh, my poor Theo, as a witness against your honour and your life ! Why did you kill him, oh, why did you kill him ? ”

“ Hush, hush ! we may be heard yet, and I have had a narrow escape,” he said in a low voice ; “ close and lock the door, and then sit down and tell me what to do. I cannot think calmly ; the end is beyond my sight, and my brain is hot with a thousand thoughts, which come all at once and bewilder me.”

Augusta locked the door, and he took his old seat by the library table and ran his hands through his wild white hair again, until she came and stood beside him, passed one arm round his neck, and leaned her cheek upon his hot brow.

“ Why don’t you run shrieking from me in horror, Gus ? ” he said. “ You hated that man Carr when you thought it was he who had killed your lover, and yet you cling to me.”

“ We are children of one father, Theo ; we are two alone in the world, with one common trouble between us.”

“ No,” he replied sternly ; “ my troubles are of my own choosing, and you shall not share them. You must not say that—I will not acknowledge it for an instant. You asked me, Augusta, why I killed him. Had he been living and I had the courage to

tell you all, you would have asked me why I had let him live.”

“I should have blessed you for sparing him and yourself.”

“It was Carr who drove me mad with his story, which I could not trust in, and yet which I came on to Deeneford to verify. Carr was afraid of me, and followed me, I learned afterwards; but I went on blindly, seeing nothing but my vengeance if the facts of my disgrace were palpable. I did not believe in a false sentimentalism existing between my wife and Horace Essenden, but in a deadly guilt, that demanded an awful and decisive blow to crush it. I did not think of killing him, but of cursing him and hurling her upon the streets, where women like her prowl by thousands, and blame heaven for their own vileness. I came to Deeneford to learn that my wife was at the curate’s house, to follow her there, to find that she had gone home through the wood alone, to enter that wood and see her and that man—that devil, as I thought him—together in conversation. When I was close upon them he broke away, after clasping my wife in his arms and kissing her—great heaven! kissing her with all the passion with which a man who loves kisses her who is loved! Had I been a thousand times a priest, I must have struck at him in my hate as he came rushing by

me. I saw in him only my wife's seducer, the man who had supplanted me, and would carry her away with him before the day was ended—the man who had blasted my home and honour, and left only misery in advance of me—and I raised my silver-headed stick, and cut at him with a giant's strength. I was looking on a dead man in the grass an instant afterwards."

Augusta gave a faint cry, and for an instant recoiled from him. He detected the movement, and said—

"Pity me a little; I knew not what I did."

When her arms were once more round him, and she was holding his head upon her bosom as though he were a child, he said in a low voice, that thrilled her more intensely than the recapitulation of his crime—"I have been mad ever since that time, Gus. No one has seen it or guessed it, for I have been very cunning in my madness, and it has only grown too big for me latterly. Knowing that, dear, I thought it was better to leave England under any pretence, than to suddenly betray my secret. I felt it all give way here," he said, touching his forehead again, "from the moment I looked upon my dead rival, and knew that I had killed him. I escaped you in the wood, and then hid my stick in the hollow of a tree that had been blasted by the

lightning, and went on to the open, where I met George Carr. He knew all—he had come upon me the instant after I had killed Essenden—and I knelt down at his feet, and begged him not to give me up, not to betray the awful secret that I must hold to my breast from that day, and let no one guess the wretch I had become.”

“And he?” asked Augusta breathlessly.

“He was generous—he was more than generous, poor fellow. I have treated him very badly in my selfishness—I have been as cruel to him as to the rest of you, in my coward’s fear that I should be branded as a murderer in God’s daylight. He took the blame upon himself for telling me that Horace loved my wife, and he said that he would rather die himself than let me suffer for the deed. He said that his life was valueless, that his character had long ago been lost to him, but that my name was spotless in the world’s sight, and should keep so with his help. He told me—I remember every word he said, though I was beset with a terrible fear—that as you and I had been ever kind to Nella, and would ever watch over her in the future, that as our words had helped to save her, and perhaps him, and as our influence, if uninterrupted, might spare Nella yet some term of her imprisonment, so he would accept the position as it stood, and make no

effort to clear his name from the suspicion which would fasten on it presently. And I—Theobald Gifford, rector of Deeneford—accepted that compact with him, and sold my soul for safety ! ”

“ Courage, Theo ; it is not so bad as that, and in the end there will come peace and repentance to you, I am sure.”

“ I am not so sure,” he said. “ I have spent years in duplicity, and the trick of lying is ingrained in me. I have feigned a hatred of the dead man to show how little his death affected me, and how I despised him and his memory ; I have been studying deception, hiding my mental weakness from you all, keeping for this room my gibberings at the ghosts that haunt me, my curses at the fate which has paralysed every honest hope. But I—I saved his daughter when she was ill in prison, and he was grateful for it—that is something, Gus ? ”

“ Yes, something,” she answered sadly.

“ I worked very hard for her, Paul Essenden and I together, and she was set at liberty. I thought,” he said, “ that Carr would understand I felt for his position, and that he would keep away from those who might arrest him for the murder. But he would not, and it has come to this.”

“ That confession, Theo,” asked Augusta, “ what made you write it ? When did you write it ? ”

“A year and a half ago, thinking that on my death-bed I would show it to Nella Carr; or that, if Carr were arrested in my time, as I feared he might be, that I would give it to his judges, and acknowledge myself the guilty man. You must not think me too much of a villain, Gus, pray don’t,” he said beseechingly; “for I had made up my mind that George Carr should not suffer for my sin—that I would rather own the truth than let him die for me. I thought that I should have the courage to face the judge and say, ‘Release the prisoner, I killed Horace Essenden.’ I swore to him that I would do that on the day of his arrest, whenever it should happen, of my own free will. I took that oath upon myself in my gratitude for his silence. And he was arrested last night, and I am free still.”

A long, heavy sigh escaped his sister, but she did not say a word. All beyond was dark and impenetrable, and she could not face it yet. Her courage to advise him to escape seemed to have become weakened, and her fears for him to have grown less; and then the awful alternative of his confession held her spell-bound. What to do for the best was not apparent; presently, from the density beyond, a ray of light might steal to guide them both in their great trial.

“I remembered that confession and came back

to-night, Gus," he continued—"not to destroy it, but to take it with me, as the statement of one who had formally and deliberately written out his own death-warrant. I saw the end clearly, as I thought, and for a time the certainty of all suspense being over gave me strength and calmness. But when I sat down in this room and read that confession, I struggled with my pride, and could not conquer it. I read of the murder until I thought that I had not treated myself fairly, and that a different version of the crime might have pleaded more surely in my favour. And then you stole in upon me, and I became awfully afraid."

"Yes, I know," Augusta murmured.

"I saw all the disgrace then—your broken heart and shadowed life, the gallows over Kliston prison gate, and the swaying, curious crowd of faces upturned to me. I saw only my danger, and I lied again and again until the loop-holes closed upon me one by one, and I had to trust you with my secret to save me from that woman, who read my guilt too well. And we—we acted the part out between us, and deceived her even against her own convictions. And I forgave her for her false estimate of my character, and turned tragedy to farce."

He laughed at this—a short, strange laugh, that

was evidence of the madness in him—and then ceased abruptly, and groaned in his agony of spirit.

“What is to be done now?” he asked.

“Patience, Theo; let me think awhile longer. This is the crisis of more lives than one.”

“Ay, yes, think for me, dear; for I am very tired.”

He closed his eyes as though he were going to sleep upon her breast, worn out by the turmoil of the day, and she made no effort to arouse him.

“It would not be fair to hang me,” he muttered a few minutes afterwards, without opening his eyes, and the woman shuddered as he spoke. Suddenly he was on his feet, with a new determination in his looks. It was the old decisive expression which had marked his better days.

“But it would be another murder to allow them to hang George Carr,” he said, “and I have to answer yet for one soul sent to its judgment without a warning of the danger. Advise me, Gus, not to turn dastard at the eleventh hour, for we have been thought truthful, honest people all our lives. We will go no further along the road which leads away from our Maker. Stop me, dear, and lead my steps aright.”

Augusta Gifford never forgot that look upon his face—that beseeching look, telling of his weakness,

and yet of a new strength which had come upon him to do justice to the wronged. The light pierced through the darkness, and the temptation was over for them both.

“Yes, Theo—aright, and to the end. We must not let the innocent suffer for the guilty. That would not be like us Giffords. In God’s name let us tell the truth, and ask mercy of all men for the faults we have committed. If they will not forgive us, Theo, He, in His illimitable mercy, will.”

“I will go, then——”

“No, I will go myself,” cried Augusta; “I desire to tell this story, and how it was all brought about.”

“I will not have it,” he said firmly; “I will not stay behind as though I was afraid to face them, and had sent you to break the news. Good-bye; I am going now steadily to the end of this, and you may trust me with myself.”

“Well, Theo, you and I together. We have been together all our lives almost, you said to-night, and in the bitterest trial of all let us be found still side by side.”

“If you wish it, then.”

He gave way, and she took the lamp in her hand, and led him like a child out of the room.

“Where is the post-chaise?”

"It is waiting for me in the roadway. I told them to wait, no matter how long I might be in coming to them again."

"Where are your hat and coat?"

"Hanging in the hall."

"Get them on, and wait for me," she said, giving him the lamp. "I am going to see Nella for a minute."

"Bring her to me, if she will come," he said, and then he went slowly down the stairs, whilst Augusta turned another way and went to Nella Carr's room. The door was unlocked, and she entered to find Nella still dressed, crouching at the bed-side. She had prayed herself asleep, with her long dark hair hanging about her shoulders. The day's fatigue had worn her out at last.

Augusta Gifford knelt beside her, and passed one arm round the neck of the sleeping girl, who waked up at once, and asked who was there.

"It is I—Augusta," said she in Nella's ear. "Don't be frightened that I have come to see you once again. You have been praying?"

"Yes."

"For him, your father?"

"Yes, Miss Gifford."

"Your prayers are answered, Nella, and I think he will be spared to you. Now, pray with me for

the one weak, sinful soul, whom we have ever thought so strong, but who gave way like other men, and dragged me with him for a time away from truth. Pray for my brother Theo, and for God's mercy on him."

"Miss—Miss Gifford—what does this mean?"

"That my brother killed Horace Essenden, and there is no further mystery around us. Will you pray for him with me, Nella, and ask no further questions now?"

"Yes," she answered.

Mr. Gifford was standing in the hall when his sister and Nella Carr came down to him—the former dressed for a sudden journey for which there was no excuse:

"Miss Carr wished to accompany us, Theo," said Augusta, "but she sees now that this is a sacred obligation which we must fulfil ourselves. She will stay and take care of the boy until her father comes to fetch her; she has promised that."

"Miss Carr is very kind and thoughtful," he answered, bowing. "Are you ready, dear?"

"Yes, quite ready. And you?"

"Ready and prepared. I feel as if a weight were off my mind at last, Gus. Good-bye, Miss Carr,

and forgive all that I have said to-night in the fear which has passed away from me?"

"I forgive all freely, sir. Oh, my poor benefactor—my best friends!" she cried, "to see you go away like this, and yet not have the courage to say stop!"

"That would be a false courage," he answered.
"Good-bye, Nella—think of me sometimes."

He stooped and kissed her, and she watched him through her blinding tears pass away into the darkness, with his sister walking by his side, and strengthening him by her companionship and faith.

CHAPTER THE ELEVENTH.

WAITING THE RESULT.

PAUL ESENDEEN walked across to the rectory the next morning. The news had reached him of George Carr's arrest, and he, who had professed for so long a desire for justice on his brother's murderer, was troubled by the news. He had hoped at last that the unhappy wretch would escape, and that the whole sad story might be allowed to rest; he had let the man pass away for ever from his vengeance, when it had been in his power to secure him, and he was sorry now that the fates had closed round him and balked all good intentions. Intensely sorry for Nella Carr's sake, for the fresh cares that would come to her, at the time that she was getting strong again—sorry also for the Giffords, whose peace of mind the arrest of Carr would materially affect.

He crossed to the rectory to console his friends after his own fashion, to talk with Gifford concerning the evidence which they would be compelled to give against the prisoner, and to learn the exact address

of Nella, whom he felt that he must see. After all, he had been the cause of George Carr's capture, for one of the constables at the village lock-up had been awakened by the conversation outside the house, had dressed himself, followed Carr, and finally arrested him near Kliston, when he was quite certain of assistance being handy for the capture of so desperate a criminal. Carr had been taken to Kliston for greater security, and it was not till late in the evening that the news had come to Paul, and kept him wakeful through the night.

Mrs. Martin had not risen when he left the house, after cautioning the servants not to excite her by the intelligence of Carr's capture, but to leave it for him to relate the facts at a later period of the day. He walked moodily along the high road, dwelling upon the results to follow, feeling a strange pity for Carr gaining ground upon him with every step away from home—and a stranger, deeper, and more natural pity for Carr's daughter.

"Yes, it would have been better if he had not been taken," he said again, as he walked on with the heaviness of his thoughts apparent enough to all who passed him, and who received no recognition for their respectful salutations.

The servant of the rectory gave a new turn to his thoughts. He had stepped into the house with

the ease of one who was sure that he was no unwelcome visitor, and had hung up his great felt hat on the tree there, when she said—

“Mr. and Miss Gifford are not at home, sir.”

“Not at home,” said Paul; “ah, they have gone to Kliston, I suppose?”

“Yes, sir, I think Miss Carr said that they had gone to Kliston.”

“Miss Carr here?” exclaimed Paul Essenden.

“Yes, she really is, sir,” replied the maid-servant, glad to speak her mind to one who was evidently as disgusted as herself with the turn that affairs had taken, “just as if she was a lady, sir, or there was not anything against her——”

“There is nothing against her, and she is one of the best ladies in the land,” interrupted Paul. “Keep your tongue still, woman, or I’ll shake it out of your head. Where is Miss Carr?”

“I think she’s in the garden,” said the maid-servant, flouncing away after this unceremonious reproof.

“Then why didn’t you say so before?” cried Paul angrily. He snatched his hat again from the tree, and went along the hall to the glass door opening on the grounds of the Reverend Theobald Gifford. Here, in the wintry-looking garden, where the black frost reigned still, sign of the hard times

that had come to those who had been loved in the place, he found the one woman whom he had ever cared for. More of a woman than when he had known her last at Deeneford, when she was only eighteen years of age, and was a beautiful girl, to whom the great shock had not come. She had refused him for a husband at that time, although he had felt that the world about him was valueless without her. Only three years and a few months since that waning summer time when he had told his love under the great elms in the home-close, and she had begged him to desist. It had seemed a dreary afterwards, but he was approaching her now with many bitter thoughts, which had not their existence then, and which rendered the present full of a deeper gloom than even in his despair he had seen awaiting him.

And the gloom was with her too, and was to last her life ; there could be no escape from it, for there could be no escape for him whose name she bore. It was around her as she walked there ; it rested on that pale face, where there was much sadness of expression, and yet, he thought, more of beauty in it than he had ever seen, as though the sorrows of her life, and her courage to endure them, had placed her closer to the saints.

A wild, extravagant thought of Paul Essenden's,

but his life had been a dull one lately, and here across his path he had met his love again—under strange circumstances, and in the front of a gigantic trouble; and yet to think how his heart still yearned for her!

She turned and saw him, and the colour rose to her face to find him before her, and then receded, leaving her more white. Her hands felt very cold, although she had placed them both within those which in his impulse he had extended to her.

“I—I did not think of your coming to-day,” she faltered forth.

“No, Nella—Miss Carr,” he answered, “and I feel that I have no right to intrude upon a grief as sacred as your own. But I heard that you were in the house, and I could not—forgive me—I could not go away again.”

“You have heard——”

“That your father is arrested, and oh, Nella, by my interference, by my haste and anger, which directed the suspicion towards him, when, without me, he might have remained free!” cried Paul. “Forgive me; it was my murdered brother who stood before me then, not your great trials, Nella.”

“I have nothing to forgive,” answered Nella, as they walked on side by side; “I have not a

right to accuse you. But you—you have not heard, then?"

"I have heard that your father is a prisoner in Kliston Gaol, and will be examined to-day before a magistrate," said Paul. "I am going to Kliston to watch the case."

"But you do not know—you do not know that he is innocent? Oh, Mr. Essenden, he never killed your brother Horace!"

"You are his daughter, and have a right to think the best of him," he replied kindly. "A woman thinks the best of any one she loves until the very last, but a man is full of suspicion and uncharitableness."

"You must not be against him, sir," said Nella, warmly. "You have no right to think badly of my father. You will pity him some day—ask his pardon for having wronged him in your thoughts, and see in him—as I see, thank God—much nobleness and gratitude."

"We will not speak of him," said Paul. "I will not, in your presence, Nella, say one word against him. Tell me if you are well—if you are prepared for all that must follow his arrest? You are calm now, but is it the calmness that can support the greatest trouble of your life?"

"Whether I shall ever know happiness again is

doubtful, perhaps," she said with a forced smile; "all before me and him is hard to guess at. But we shall be together, and the past troubles we have experienced will give us greater strength and love. With the awful care in this house, it seems wrong to rejoice, Mr. Essenden; but I must think of him a little."

"How can you think of him with you in the future—why buoy yourself up with such a fallacy?"

"You have not heard—you do not know that——"

And then she paused, and looked away from him.

"Is there more to relate? What can have happened to afford you one hope of better times?"

"Of better times for us only—I am very selfish," sighed Nella; "no, I will not tell you now. My lips shall not be the first to speak of a good man's ruin, and of all the desolation that is left within his home."

She turned as though to hasten into the house, but Paul stopped her eagerly.

"Miss Carr, your manner alarms me, and suggests new suspicions," he said; "pray do not leave me in this suspense, if you have anything to divulge. You speak of trouble to this house—a good man's ruin, and your father's innocence. What am I to think?"

"Wait for a few hours, Mr. Essenden, and the truth will come to all of us."

"I cannot wait an instant," he replied. "Tell me all that you have heard, Nella. Surely no one has a greater right to claim your confidence. If there is a shock in store for me, it is only you from whom I could receive it with composure. Do not leave it for the stranger to stab me in the streets."

She hesitated, and then said suddenly—

"Yes, it is best that I should speak, perhaps, but you will feel this acutely, for the sake of one very dear to me and still more dear to you—a fair woman, whose cares may not end from this day. Your place is not here, but by her side, offering her your sympathy, and letting not even the grim truth rob her of one atom of your love. For she was not to blame, and her brother's sin should not be borne by her."

"Her brother's sin—Gifford's sin?" gasped forth Paul Essenden. "Is it possible?—can it be possible that he killed my brother Horace? Great heaven, I see the truth approaching nearer now! Tell me, Nella, in mercy's name, all that you have heard!"

Walking side by side along the garden-path before the house, in the cold winter's wind, with the winter's landscape round them, she told the story, so far as she was acquainted with it, of Theobald

Gifford's fall from right. He listened to her to the end without an interruption, and said—

"It is a late repentance, but a sincere one, and I will not cast a stone at him! Poor Gifford!" and then he added slowly, as though his sympathy was unfair to his dead brother, "poor Horace! your death will be at last atoned for, then."

"You will go to Kliston at once?" asked Nella, anxiously. "She must be alone there."

"Yes, I will go," he said.

"I have promised to remain for a short while, but I am very anxious, and can scarcely stay. I—I think that my father will return soon; that Mrs. Gifford will be back before the day is out to see to her child, and allow me to depart. Oh, sir, this anxiety is very terrible!"

"He will be here soon," said Paul thoughtfully; "he may carry you away where no one will ever find you again."

"I shall be with him, and there will be peace with both of us."

"You cannot leave Augusta Gifford in this great distress," he said; "she was your friend, and you must be her comforter. It will not be right to steal away and leave her broken-hearted."

"She has dearer friends than I," said Nella, "and she will find comfort with them instead of with me,

poor girl! I have needed consolation in my time; I have given it, I hope, now and then amongst those whom I understand, and who cling to my life; but it is beyond my power to offer that dear woman consolation. She is too much above me and that world to which I belong."

" You are wrong, Nella."

" If I am wrong," she said, with a radiant look upon her face, " I will be her slave, and know no greater happiness than to devote my life to hers. She is sure of that, and she will ask me to come to her if she want me—if she feel that I shall not remind her too acutely of the troubles by which she is surrounded. But, sir, she will not think of me."

" I am sure she will."

" Say that I await her summons, then," replied Nella; " and now waste no longer time, when in Kliston friends are wondering why you keep away. There is a matter of life or death beyond this place."

" Yes, Nella, you are right. I will linger only to ask your forgiveness for my thoughts of your father; only to beg you to inform him, should you see him before me, that I am sorry for the past suspicions which separated us, and which, for Gifford's sake, he would not dispel."

" Ah, Mr. Essenden, if you could forgive him his great share in all the troubles here!"

"He did not see the result, and he thought that he was acting for the best in telling that which he believed to be the truth. I know that now, even with the terrible result confronting me. Ask him, Nella, in that generosity which took all the blame to screen the man who had been kind to you, to forgive a friend's injustice."

He shook hands with her hurriedly, and went away to Kliston, and Nella Carr passed into the house to endeavour to pacify little Theo, who had grown anxious concerning the place being empty of the loved ones, and wished to know what had become of his papa and aunty.

Nella endeavoured to devote herself to the child for the rest of the day, to distract his attention from the father, to relate stories to him which should interest him for awhile, although it was heart-breaking work to attempt their narration. As the hours stole on, she became more nervous; a new fear possessed her that her father's examination had been postponed, and that the Giffords were waiting at Kliston for another day, or that Mr. Gifford had died of shame and remorse on the journey, and the world would never know that it was his hand which had deprived Horace Essenden of life. Surely some news should have reached her, good or bad, by this time? She would have spared no expense herself to

relieve the anxiety of those to whom silence was a torture, and some one might have thought of her, sitting in that silent home, from which its owner had stepped forth to judgment. The night was coming on, and she had got rid of the child at last by promises of presents in the morning. She would proceed to the village and learn if any news had been received from Kliston—some one had perhaps returned with the tidings with which the great town must be astir.

She put on her bonnet and shawl, and went out of the house. The village was as still as ever, the lights were already dotting the cottage windows ; they were singing a bacchanalian chorus at the Deeneford Inn, where the glow of the firelight streamed into the roadway through the red blind before the tap-room windows ; houses were being locked up for the night, sober villagers were going early to their beds, for fuel was dear, the winter nights were long, and there was nothing worth sitting up for in these dreadful times—some boys, who had been sliding on the frozen mill-pond, were returning home with merry laughter, and the church clock in the steeple was striking six. She stood in the old village again, and wondered who had news for her of all that had happened that day in Kliston town.

She passed close to the door of the inn, where they would be talking of the murder, of the new turn that affairs had taken since George Carr's arrest; but the passage was empty, and there was only a carroty-headed youth behind the bar, surreptitiously helping himself to biscuits.

As she stood, unresolved as to her next step, the clattering of a horse's hoofs upon the hard road suggested news approaching. The rider was advancing at a rapid pace, as though on a mission of importance, and all Deeneford seemed to be echoing with the noise.

This was the messenger for whom she was waiting, she was assured—the bearer of glad tidings for her, and of bad news for those whom every one had held in high esteem in Deeneford. It was coming at last, to make amends for all the long suspense which had preyed upon her that day. Suddenly the clatter of the horse's hoofs ceased, as though the rider had reached his journey's end, and she thought that it was at the rectory where the news had been first taken. She turned to retrace her steps, when the noise came on again, and presently her eyes discerned in the darkness a mounted rider, advancing swiftly down the road. An ostler from the inn, scenting custom to the establishment, or attracted by the late comer into Deeneford, sauntered from the house

meet the traveller, and was close at Nella's side as, with a scuffling in the roadway, and a shower of sparks from the horse's heels, the rider came to a full stop.

"Nella," said the voice of the man, as he flung himself from the horse, and advanced towards her with his arms held out, "they told me at the rectory that you were in the village—and I could not wait for your return."

"It is—it is you, then—my poor father!"

"Yes, it is I," he said, clasping her to his breast.

"Back again for good," said Nella, when she had found her voice again—"saved at last, thank heaven!"

"Thank heaven!" he repeated.

"And Mr. Gifford—has he——"

"Hush, hush, dear! we will speak of Mr. Gifford presently. There, you are excited now—don't say another word till we reach home. Bring the horse on to the rectory, man."

"Be it—be it George Carr," asked the ostler, "who was tooked up yesterday for murder, down at Kliston?"

"Yes; and released to-day. You'll congratulate me, Wesson, I'm sure, for you were one of the best of my servants, and thought there was no one like the master, once."

"I'm mortal glad, sir. I never thought——"

"That's right. Come on with the horse at once, and never mind the good folk at the inn. Now, Nella?"

"Tell me of Mr. Gifford, please. I am very anxious."

"Yes—when we get back. I am safe until to-morrow, I hope," he muttered.

"Safe!" she cried.

"Yes, for a few hours," he whispered. "Now, don't say another word till you are at home, my dear. This is happiness enough for me, God knows," he added gratefully.

Then silently, with her hands upon his arm, and his wistful looks bent upon one whom she had lost so long, the father walked onwards with his child.

CHAPTER THE TWELFTH.

LIFE FOR LIFE.

FATHER and daughter were silent until the rectory was reached, and they were seated together in the drawing-room. The man waited outside with the horse, and walked up and down to keep warmth in himself and beast; the two who had been separated so long conversed before the fire, and spoke in whispers, lest eavesdroppers should be abroad that night.

There was something more to be explained, Nella was certain, for her father loved not mystery for its own sake, and the hopes that the daughter had had appeared once more to be fading away into that misty background where no hopes could live.

“Mr. Gifford has confessed,” was Nella’s first eager question, “and you are free at last?”

“Yes, he has confessed,” replied Carr; “it was a confession told with much calmness and clearness, and it seemed to explain the whole secret which had perplexed them so long.”

“Seemed?” said Nella.

"Well, it explained everything, then. To-day they are all satisfied with its truth; there was not a single excuse for detaining me longer in custody, and even my previous bad character," he said drily, "did not stand in the way of the liberty before me. I was afraid that it would end like this."

Again Nella's answer was an echo of one word of his speech—a word that affected the whole sentence, and filled her with a new sense of dismay.

"Afraid?" she repeated wonderingly.

"Yes, Nella," he said, letting his great brown hand fall upon his daughter's lightly, and looking steadily before him, as though at the picture of which he spoke, "for I had become used to the position. There was nothing before me that I cared for save yourself, and you were better from me. I was the murderer of Horace Essenden; I brought about his death by my betrayal of his passion for Mrs. Gifford, and I could have suffered without much regret, knowing that you would be happy presently. I did not care—I do not care," he said very slowly, "to change places with the benefactor."

"It is not right, father, that you should think thus; with me, you should be grateful that your innocence is clear."

"And that Theobald Gifford stands in the felon's dock instead of me?" said Carr moodily. "No, I

cannot realize it. I have learned to be grateful for all that he has done for me and you, to understand at last his character, and to pity him with all my heart. When his goodness broke down, Nella, his mind broke with it, and made a wreck of him. It was his madness killed Horace Essenden, not that hand which helped you in the early days."

"But, father, they will not hang him."

"They will not hang him without me as a witness, I think, and I shall not be in England to-morrow. I will not turn against him," he exclaimed.

"Oh, if your absence could save him at the eleventh hour, father—if they think him mad, and will not believe his statement?"

"He is mad," replied Carr; "that will be proved easily enough."

"But," said Nella, becoming alarmed at the new light in which the facts seemed arranging themselves, "if they think this the result of his imagination, they——"

And then she paused again, and allowed her father to conclude.

"They will think that I committed the murder after all. Well, let them," he said; "if they have had that idea for three years in their heads, why should we disturb it now?"

"But you——"

"I shall be beyond their reach, and Gifford will be saved. Nella," he said, in an excited tone, "save that man we must at any cost. You will not ask me, for the sake of the little character that a returned convict possesses, to crush the pride of the one family that has done so much for us. It was he and his sister who soothed the dying moments of the wife I had forsaken; it was his sister who did all she could for you, who supported and strengthened you when others turned away; it was the Giffords who did not fall from us when the old offence against the law rose up to crush you; it was Gifford whose efforts and influence obtained, when you were ill in prison, a commutation of your sentence; and it is this same despairing penitent who comes forward at the last rather than that I should suffer for his actions. By heaven," he cried, with his old passion setting his face aglow, "that man shall not die for me!"

"Tell me how it is possible to save him?" asked Nella eagerly.

"By the loss of my character," he said, shrugging his shoulders, "which is not of much use to me, so far as a suspicious world is concerned, but which those who know me best will understand some day. The Giffords, Paul, and you—I have seen Paul this afternoon at Kliston, Nella—are aware that I did not kill young Essenden, and they make up the world and

the world's opinion that I shall ever care for. They will believe in me, and all who do not will soon forget the story, and be gossiping in their homes of matters newer to the times. Perhaps," he added, almost mockingly, "they will believe, a few of them, that my revenge did not include murder in its plans. Let them think what they please, so that the minister of Deeneford is not found 'Guilty' at the next assizes."

"And you—what is to become of you?"

"Oh, leave me to myself, Nella; the most fitting companion after all. If I had never brought you here, what a different life yours might have been!"

"If we had gone abroad together, as we will do now, and——"

"As we will not do, Nella," he said decisively; "for ill-fortune marches side by side with me, and your new life begins from this day."

"Good or ill-fortune we will share together, father."

"It is impossible," he answered, "for I must depart at once. I must for a time, and whatever may be the result of Mr. Gifford's trial, wander away into my old hiding-places, whence no man may drag me to bear witness against my neighbour. Some day I will return—years hence, when I am sure that you are happy, and that there is a better, stronger nature than my own to shield you from the storms which

life may bring again. An hour ago I was in Deene-ford Wood, where the murder was committed, Nella."

"For what reason?"

"Years ago I saw Gifford conceal in the hollow of a tree the silver-headed stick with which, in his rage, he had killed his rival. That and myself are the only witnesses, save a madman's raving, against the honest name these Giffords bear. They will be heard of no more."

"Oh, generous heart, that would take this shadow back upon itself instead of me and my love!" cried Nella; "does it deserve to break alone?"

"It will rejoice when you rejoice," he answered, "and it will beat in sympathy with yours wherever it may be. Presently its owner, a little older, and more feeble, will steal back to your home to remind you that he lives, and to make sure that those who are dear to him have not quite forgotten him. You know who will be most dear to you then, I hope?"

"Ever yourself, at least."

"And Paul," he added earnestly. "Ah, don't shrink away as you shrank away from him before the curse fell on us! You are no more guilty in God's sight or man's than when he loved you first; and his is a nature that is not likely to change. He thinks of you still, Nella."

"No," she cried.

"He thinks of you still," he repeated; "at times I believe he has sorrowed more for me than for his brother's death, because the murder lay between his hope and yours, and sundered you. Oh, Nella, in your pride—that sense of unworthiness to become his wife and share his home—you must not break him down again!"

"You must not speak of this. Paul Essenden's happiness lies not in my direction, but in one more deserving of it. Leave that happiness to me."

"You will study it for his sake and mine, then?"

"Yes, when we can dream of happiness again," she answered, thinking of Augusta.

"Amen. That promise, Nella, makes me go away light-hearted, seeing in the distance the fairer landscape before your life and his. And now, for the Giffords' sake, dear Nella, bid me God-speed upon my journey. Wish me a safe and swift departure from this land, even though justice calls for my evidence against a criminal, and halts for want of me. That criminal has saved us, and we will not have his blood upon our heads."

"No, we will not," she answered. "God speed you, father; we will give him life for life at least, if it lies in our power."

And they gave it him, for at the first examination

there was only a weak mind's confession of the crime, and the proofs were wanting to confirm it. The man who it was said had been a witness to the murder had left the country in great haste, and the tree wherein it was asserted the weapon was concealed which had killed Horace Essenden was cut down, and found to contain no evidence to support the statement that the self-accused had made. The law began to doubt Theobald Gifford's veracity; and the witnesses—his sister and Nella Carr—could only quote the man's own words on that night when he resolved to surrender himself into the hands of justice. The troubles of the minister had turned his brain, and this was a story which only a madman could have framed, it was at last asserted. He had been full of strange inventions latterly, it was proved, and a second statement of an appointment in India, offered him by his old friend Warwick, was sworn to by that gentleman as wholly the offspring of Mr. Gifford's imagination. People began to testify to the new habits of the man, to fits of despondency, of eccentricity, which no sane mind could possibly give way to, and before his trial occurred there was evidence enough in his favour, unless he was a greater actor than he had ever been a preacher. He began to forget that he was in prison, to imagine himself in his study at Deeneford once more, composing his

sermon for the Sunday, to see before him at all hours of the day and night his wife, and child, and sister, those who had made up home before his mind gave way, and to hold long conversations about the happiness surrounding them. In his weaker estate he had become a happier man, and gone back to a period when his faith was strong in all about him, as well as in himself.

There came a host of doctors to prove the insanity of the prisoner, and how a mind diseased was prone to convict itself of crimes of which in a healthier state it would have never dreamed, and this case was so like one of the many which precedent had established, that it scarcely varied in one particular. Theobald Gifford was released from custody, and Justice rubbed its eyes beneath its bandage, and thought that it had acted prematurely in allowing George Carr to leave his cell. The first confession of Theobald Gifford had deceived his hearers, but then they did not know how mad he was.

He was taken back to his wife, to whom he had written on the day of his confession, and who waited for him anxiously and nervously beneath the porch, and was, for the little time that life was left to him, his nurse and confidante again. It was thought that he would not know her—he had spoken of her much in prison, but his friends had kept her from him for

precaution's sake,—or that, knowing her, the old bitter hatred would return to him with the recollection of his wrongs; but the mind treasured no longer thoughts of injuries received, and he was weak and childish. The wife's young face only brought back comfort to him, it was seen, as in the old days when he had loved her very much; and he went towards her with a smile, which made a few hearts ache perhaps, but filled his own with a joy that in his saner time he had scarcely known.

"Ah, Laura," he said, kissing her, "I am glad you have come back. I have been building so much on your coming. These people about me," he added ungratefully, "are all very well, but they do not understand me as you do."

And Paul Essenden, watching him at times with a strange, pitying interest, and knowing all the story, could forgive the brother's death, and believe that Gifford had gone mad, even before the blow was struck.

"I cannot hold up my hand against him," said Paul to his aunt, when she had learned all the truth, despite his efforts to conceal it from her. "I will forgive him as Horace would have forgiven him, had he recovered from the blow. Over the one sin of the man who thought himself so strong, let us drop mercifully the veil."

CHAPTER THE THIRTEENTH.

DREAMING OF HAPPINESS.

“IN the future, when we can dream of happiness again,” had been almost the last words of Nella’s parting with her father; in the future she would study the happiness of the man she loved, had been her last promise, knowing, as she thought, in which direction all Paul’s hopes lay. She saw in the latter days an end to the misconceptions of the early life, and waited for it patiently, content to wait, studying intently, and not interfering rashly, as in the time when she was younger, and judged for herself what was best for the friends in whom she was interested.

In the future. Ere we close our book, let us pause awhile to see the future for ourselves, and not as this visionary—this woman who would give up her last chance for an idea—has painted it, putting her faith in the reality of the picture she has limned. Let us, in the good old style, pair off our characters, and leave not one unaccounted for to whom the reader may have extended his passing interest. Standing

on the higher ground, what see we in the days ahead of us, to give life and colour to our finis?

In the foreground, then, Paul Essenden and Nella. They are together, with the past submerged, and all past errors rectified. It has been a hard struggle to secure this Nella, after all, for there have been many barriers in the way, and for awhile she has quoted society and society's laws, the world's verdict and the world's opinion, and Paul has only to plead in return his misery without her. All mistakes are cleared up and accounted for, and Augusta says, with a bright smile, that there has never been an engagement between her and Paul, and that Paul—she almost laughs here pleasantly—has never thought of loving her in all his life. And still for awhile the dark-eyed woman hesitates, and the shadows that have followed her so long seem stealing towards her from the valley, as she steps half-way to meet them, thinking that they are more fitting for her than this faithful lover. She owns not to him yet that her love for him is of an early growth, and has been her one struggle to conquer since they met first at the Upland Farm, and he thinks—poor blind suitor that he is—that it is want of affection that keeps her from his arms. He believes in her respect for him, as in the old days, when one Sunday afternoon they sat beneath the elms and she told him that she

should never marry, and the restless fever at his heart returns to him again, and gives him wild ideas of going away for good—for very good at last, if his aunt will only let him go, and take Augusta for companion instead of his unsettled self. He seeks counsel from his aunt in his anxiety—as Horace would have done long since, only have been more mysterious about it—and the gentlewoman's pride succumbs to his sorrow, and she sees that it may be best for Paul and Nella to set themselves above the laws of caste, and for the latter to think of herself a little more. Finally, there arrives to the rescue of Paul's hopes a woman who has married for position only, and the moral of whose life is a homily to all who need one, and Laura speaks of Nella's love for him, of a sorrow which Nella had showed for a few days, when she heard in Wilton that he was engaged to Augusta Gifford, and was quite sure that it was the best thing that could ever happen to him! This is a fact which the eager Paul confirms in a secret conversation with a woman called Sally, who thinks of Nella Carr as Nella thinks of Augusta Gifford yet, and who has some inkling of the truth, and sees how the story should end for the one who has saved her. And the story ends at last with Nella thinking once again of the promise to her father, and in saying timidly, that if Paul's happiness is so completely

fixed upon his marriage with her, and if without her there can only be the old unsettled existence which gave him change, but never brought him peace, why, she must think of him—a little! She confesses presently that she would have been as wretched as himself if he had gone away again; and thus looking forward, these two dream of happiness. Society is shocked, for the match is unequal, and only hearts are fairly balanced here; still they are not living for society, but for themselves.

We dream with them of their happiness, despite the world holding up its hands at this ill-assorted union—that world which will turn its back, if it ever gets the chance, on the wife whom a country gentleman has taken to himself. We see that it is as well this gentleman has never loved the world, but has kept studiously from it, and been at times fond of mixing in the company of those beneath him in position; as well for Nella as for himself that he will never seek society beyond his wife and children, and in the circle of his home find the beginning and the end of all ambitions. A few outré people, believing in the joy of the angels over one sinner that repenteth, as well as in the exultation of mortals very often over one poor soul that drifts from right, see the fitness of this union, the goodness of the woman whom affliction has purified,

and whose great ordeal might have broken down, in lieu of strengthening, many professing to be better than herself. We see not darkly through the glass the end of such a life, and the light falls on her from the heaven.

Do they dream of happiness in the future in the rector's family, where all was "sweet contentment" once? Will the better days ever come back there? The future is not clear, and lies further away from us, but there will be peace at least, and all the storm-clouds gone. But we see grief in Deeneford rectory for awhile, and a poor penitent making his peace with all whom he has wronged, and all who have ever wronged him. The past strength of mind strangely returns to him in his greater weakness, and he becomes very anxious as the sands filter through the glass. He asks what has become of George Carr, and why he himself has been spared the scaffold over Kliston prison gate, and he will have his answer. He makes once more his confession for George Carr's sake, and they who listen acknowledge that it is right and just that all should be known, and one wanderer of the earth exonerated. So the truth circulates at last for men to marvel at, and then the facts grow hazy, and are only remembered presently by retentive country folk living in the village where the murder was.

Theobald Gifford is sleeping peacefully at this time with his ancestors; and the family—his widow, sister, and his child—are travelling for their health's sake on the Continent. Presently they will return and settle down in a fair resting-place, where people will not know their past, or will love them for themselves. They will be near Paul and his young wife, who will not be living at Deeneford then, but in a new home close to the house of a tall old lady, whom they call their aunt still ; and here the peace and rest they crave, after the turmoil of their younger lives, will come to all of them.

In the future there approaches also—always at uncertain intervals, but more frequently as the time steals on—a white-haired, grave-faced mortal, whose love for Nella's children seems something greater and deeper than even his love for Nella. A sorrowful man, as though the past had weighed on him heavily ; but one who is deeply penitent for the faults committed in it, and who, for all his grave looks, is hopeful and prayerful, seeing beyond the present the haven where the weary and heavy-laden find their shelter from the tempest. In his own way, he is intensely happy ; and for the quiet life about him he is intensely grateful.

Here we leave our figures, then, and the circles on the water widen and die out. They are figures

of our poor humanity about us, and we have had their faults and failings to dilate upon, rather than their virtues.

Heroes and heroines have not played their parts in these pages, and this has been a record of much suffering in consequence—of the suffering that resists the shock, and the suffering that gives way.

Oh, poor humanity, that creates its own troubles, by trusting in itself so much, and in its Ruler so little, it is well that the moral is learned sometimes before the sun goes down in the darkness which thine own vanity has made !

THE END.









